THE TIES THAT BIND: BREAKING THE BONDS OF VICTIMIZATION IN THE NOVELS OF BARBARA PYM, FAY WELDON AND MARGARET ATWOOD

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Fran M. Rathburn, B.A., M.A.
Denton, Texas
December, 1994

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In this study of several novels each by Barbara Pym, Fay Weldon, and Margaret Atwood, I focus on two areas: the ways in which female protagonists break out of their victimization by individuals, by institutions, and by cultural tradition, and the ways in which each author uses a structural pattern in her novels to propel her characters to solve their dilemmas to the best of their abilities and according to each woman's personality and strengths. Chapter I discusses the theme of female victimization as it appeared in the earliest British novels, then introduces Pym, Weldon, and Atwood, giving their career highlights, discussions of their major themes and motifs, and brief descriptions of the novels in this study. The following three chapters describe how the protagonists break out of their victimization according to the following structural paradigm:

PYM:	recognition	=>	adjustment	=>	acceptance
WELDON:	recognition	=>	rebellion	=>	victory
ATWOOD:	recognition	=>	flight	=>	renunciation

The chapter on Pym includes detailed analysis of *Excellent Women* and *A Glass of Blessings,* with brief discussions of *Some Tame Gazelle, Jane and Prudence,* and *Less Than Angels.* The chapter on Weldon includes detailed analysis of *Female Friends* and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil,* with brief discussions of *Remember Me* and *Praxis.* And the chapter on Atwood includes detailed analysis of *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye,* with brief discussions of *The Edible Woman, The Handmaid'sTale,* and *The Robber Bride.* In the conclusion, I contrast the strategies, style,

and content of Pym, Weldon, and Atwood as well as discuss their individual strengths and emphases.

Pym, Weldon, and Atwood are three modern authors who have consistently written about the victimization of women and the ways in which their female protagonists come to recognize and expunge it. These writers, their writing styles, and their characters are radically different, yet Pym, Weldon, and Atwood share in common the subject matter of women's search of fulfillment and identity in a male-dominated society. In their own ways, these authors become modern mythmakers by striking the sparks of recognition in modern readers.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Page numbers are noted in parentheses within the text.

Abbreviation	Title	Author
STG	*Some Tame Gazelle*	Barbara Pym
EW	*Excellent Women*	Barbara Pym
PJ	*Prudence and Jane*	Barbara Pym
LA	*Less Than Angels*	Barbara Pym
GB	*A Glass of Blessings*	Barbara Pym
VPE	*A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters*	Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym, Eds.
ED	*The Edible Woman*	Margaret Atwood
SU	*Surfacing*	Margaret Atwood
CE	*Cat's Eye*	Margaret Atwood
HT	*The Handmaid's Tale*	Margaret Atwood
RB	*The Robber Bride*	Margaret Atwood
FJ	*The Fat Woman's Joke*	Fay Weldon
PX	*Praxis*	Fay Weldon
RM	*Remember Me*	Fay Weldon
FF	*Female Friends*	Fay Weldon
LL	*The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*	Fay Weldon

CHAPTER I

THE TIES THAT BIND: BREAKING THE BONDS OF VICTIMIZATION IN THE NOVELS OF BARBARA PYM, FAY WELDON AND MARGARET ATWOOD

Victimization of women in the novel goes as far back as one of the earliest British practitioners, Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), whose *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1742) and *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748) set the trend for centuries to come. In these novels, the heroines, women of impeccable virtue, are pursued by evil men who seek to conquer them during a time in history when a woman's chastity was her key to securing her future. Because of patriarchal laws, it was impossible for women to achieve economic security on their own; therefore, their chastity became a bargaining tool for parents eager to insure a propitious economic alliance. In the former novel, Pamela, a maidservant, persistently resists Mr. B's base intentions until he finally relents and marries her. Thus, Pamela's reward for protecting her virtue is marriage into a higher class with all the benefits that go along with improved status and economic power. However, in the latter novel, Clarissa's pursuer, Charles Lovelace, the dashing aristocratic rake whose hobby is female conquest, is so relentless in his attempts to destroy Clarissa's purity that he finally resorts to rape. Sullied in her own mind, Clarissa chooses death over capitulation and dies of a lengthy illness, thereby negating the conquest of Lovelace and metaphorically gaining victory--a Pyrrhic victory, perhaps, but of Clarissa's own choosing! It seems, therefore, that from the earliest English novels, women who have been victims of gender or cultural

dominance have found ways to break the bonds of victimization and to establish some degree of authority over their own lives.

However, because of centuries of religious and social enculturation, women who joined the ranks as writers did not openly revolt against the patterns of gender and cultural dominance until the nineteenth century. During that time, the "Woman Question" came to the fore among prominent thinkers and artists, who challenged the sexual, political, economic, and educational endeavors of women. The advances made in the nineteenth century and those of the early-twentieth century opened the way for women writers to explore old literary subjects in new ways and to discover and define the uniquely feminine voice and experience. Since that time, many observant writers have taken as their province the job of exploring and exposing injustice in women's lives.

One of their subjects has been that of victimization in its many shades and forms. Even early female novelists deal with the subject in their novels. For instance, Jane Eyre handles her victimization by Rochester (his bigamous attempt to marry her) by forgiving him, but only after the author has blinded and disfigured him. Bronte never actually takes up the subject of Jane's victimization by Rochester; she merely metes out literary justice. However, as many twentieth-century authors attempt to explore the female consciousness, they find themselves more deeply drawn into the dynamics of the oppresor/victim conflict. The *why* and *how* of any situation are now as important as the *who* and *what*.

Barbara Pym, Fay Weldon, and Margaret Atwood are three modern female authors who have consistently written about the victimization of women as well as the ways in which their female protagonists come to recognize and expunge it. For this study, I define a victim as someone who is made to suffer through domination, prejudice, or abuse (emotional or physical). The heroines of these authors must break out of the patterns of

dominance to the degree that their own personal strengths and personalities allow. Some characters, those of Barbara Pym, for instance, are fairly tolerant of their conditions and may simply seek understanding and acceptance. Fay Weldon's females often resort to more radical approaches to deal with their problems. Their rebellion against injustice brings about varying degrees of isolation, villification, or insanity. Margaret Atwood's protagonists sometimes must make a symbolic or actual submergence under water in their mythic attempts to gain the strength and insight necessary to break the ties that bind them. These writers, their characters, and their writing styles are parti-colored and disparate, yet all three authors share a consistent concern with exposing the behaviors and cultural practices which seek to keep women from fully realizing themselves. Together they deal with the theme of women's victimization by individuals such as men, other women, family members, as well as by institutions, by cultural tradition, and even by fiction itself. These three writers make a useful, if variegated, combination for critical analysis because their variety of approaches and resolutions offers insight as well as delight to their readers.

In addition, I will introduce a paradigm that visually illustrates the structure each author uses to propel her protagonists from the state of recognition of their victimization through its resolution. The pattern is slightly different for each author, but involves a three-step process in each novel:

PYM:	Recognition	=>	Adjustment	=>	Acceptance
WELDON:	Recognition	=>	Rebellion	=>	Victory
ATWOOD:	Recognition	=>	Flight	=>	Renunciation

Examining the authors' work within this framework allows for

keener comparisons and illustrates the thematic and structural emphases of each writer.

First, Barbara Pym (1913-1980), born in Oswestry, Shropshire and educated at St. Hilda's College, Oxford, was the British author of six modestly successful novels between 1950 and 1961. When she found herself suddenly unable to publish her work in the sixties and seventies, she presumed it was because of "the effect of the so-called Swinging Sixties" (VPE 213); however in 1977, when both Lord David Cecil and Philip Larkin listed her as one of the most underrated writers of the century,[1] Pym was "rediscovered" and lived to see the reissuance of her first six works as well as the publication of three new novels. One of them, *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), was short-listed for the internationally prestigious Booker Prize. Her autobiography, *A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters*, and two previously unpublished novels appeared posthumously, bringing Pym's canon to twelve books.

Robert Emmet Long points out that Pym, who admired Jane Austen greatly, has been compared to Austen more than to any other writer (201-06, 208-09), in part because the novels of both authors chronicle the narrow sphere of women's lives and the problems women face in securing marriage, or when they do not marry, the problems of finding a place in a society that neglects and undervalues single women. The sense of social protest in their work is both subtle and gentle. Although most of Pym's canon confronts the particular concerns of single women, several married women appear in the novels to help round out her comprehensive view of the condition of modern women.

Pym was unhappy with the status of unmarried women when she wrote in her journal in 1972: "The position of the unmarried woman--unless, of course, she is somebody's mistress, is of no interest whatsoever to the readers of modern fiction" (VPE 269). Yet she proceeded to write her comic novels of manners about these

"uninteresting" women, whom she referred to as spinsters, throughout her canon, imbuing them along the way with wit, tenacity, and uncanny perception into their condition. She also wrote several novels with married protagonists (*A Glass of Blessings, Jane and Prudence* , and *An Academic Question*), in which she explored the issues of married women. All of Pym's novels tend to emphasize the problems with love and marriage; the preference of men for pretty women over more suitable, but less attractive, women; the difficulty of achieving a sense of importance and fulfillment in a male-dominated world; and finally the vast difference in what women expect from life and what they actually get. In regard to this contrast, Sun-Hee Lee notes that Pym's women "wish to fulfill their dreams of romantic love through matrimony; on the other hand, however, they see the grim reality that their marriages can bring: the end of their dreams and freedom" (3). Whether the women remain spinsters or choose to marry, they all face disillusionment and disappointment. To some degree, however, they break out of their victimization to a degree that allows them to accept the world as it is, while finding enough satisfaction to be contented. Each heroine carves out of her experiences a hard-won self-awareness of her world and the place she chooses in it. Furthermore, each of Pym's novels in this study fits into and reflects the structural paradigm, recognition of victimization => adjustment => acceptance.

Although Pym's characters never see themselves as oppressed, they nevertheless suffer from both subtle and more overt forms of victimization. Barbara Brothers, for instance, argues that in living and loving, Pym's characters are actually victimized by an "idealized view of the romantic paradigm" presented in fiction, in which "fantasy shapes the expectations of the characters" (62). For example, in *A Glass of Blessings* (1958), the main character Wilmet

is subject to a lifetime of the influence of novels (especially Victorian) and the popular, cultural assumption that a woman fulfills herself through marriage. Even though Wilmet has been married to Rodney for ten years, she finds herself dissatisfied with her marriage and her life. She does not work, but fills her days with a scattering of shopping trips, lunches, and church functions. Wilmet believes her life should be more like that of the heroines she reads about in novels who find adventure and romance in their lives. Only after a close evaluation of herself, her friendships, and her relationship with Rodney does Wilmet begin to understand that life is not made up of the exhilarating events and dalliances one finds in novels, but rather it is made up of the satisfaction derived from small quotidian pleasures and the contentment of finding one's niche in life.

Pym included other married women in her novels who were disappointed with the way their lives had turned out. Jane Cleveland of *Jane and Prudence* (1953), for instance, is married to a rural and unworldly vicar, and in spite of her excellent education, has settled into a pastoral setting, where she has spent the past fifteen years attempting to be the kind of contented clergyman's wife that she had read about in so many Victorian novels. But she never feels that she fits into church affairs and in addition finds the passion waning in her marriage. While Wilmet in *A Glass of Blessings* is willing to consider an extramarital affair, Jane does not desire to enliven her life with another man. She is friends with Prudence Bates, the other protagonist of the title, who had been her student at Oxford and who is single. Unlike Jane, who has settled into a comfortable, albeit dull, life, Prudence has gone from one unhappy affair to another, never finding satisfaction or fulfillment. This novel is the only one in Pym's fiction that closely contrasts the different lifestyles and outlooks of a married woman and a single woman together, ironically pointing up the disappointment of both in the way love has turned

out for them. But while Jane finally comes to a compassionate acceptance of her husband and of life's shortcomings, Prudence never reaches the maturity of Jane and continues to search blindly for the man who will fulfill her dreams. The fact that one of the heroines does reach a place of acceptance emphasizes Pym's belief that contentment is possible in spite of the fact that life does not always turn out the way one wishes. The novel further illustrates what happens to women (Prudence, in this case) who cling to false assumptions about love and delusions of romantic grandeur.

Jane and Prudence, like most of Pym's fiction, also deals with the theme of changing sex roles and women's increasing strength and superiority (JP 172), even though both sexes perpetuate the old sexual stereotypes. Pym attacks the topic again in *Less Than Angels*, her novel which comes the closest to depicting a modern, liberated woman. *Less Than Angels* explores the idea of how a young woman faces the radical social changes after the second world war. Unlike many of Pym's unmarried women, Catherine Oliphant of this novel has a rewarding career and high self-esteem, even though she must make her own way without the economic help of a man or the support of a parish church (as Wilmet has in *A Glass of Blessings*). This novel is important because it shows the ways in which both men and women are confused by the shifting sexual roles and how both sexes are victimized by cultural tradition which has influenced men to see women as submissive and passive and themselves as deserving of enhanced privilege and status. Catherine is the only Pymian heroine who refuses to participate in the destructive hegemonic relationship between the sexes. For her courage and independent thinking, she loses her lover, Tom Mallow, although she later wins the love of Alaric Lydgate, a man who is less rigid concerning sexual roles.

Even though Pym created a courageous and likable character in

Catherine, who is the most liberated of her characters, she was also concerned with other conditions in British society which victimized women, and these she exposed in her first two novels, *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950) and *Excellent Women* (1952). Pym's first novel established the author's concern for the plight of unmarried women in England. Her heroine in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Belinda Bede, who is fifty and unmarried, faces loneliness, a feeling of uselessness (unlike Catherine Oliphant in *Less Than Angels*, she has no job or career), and the fear of losing her comfortable living arrangement and the companionship of her sister should Harriet marry.

However, Pym's second novel, *Excellent Women* defines more deeply and clearly the subtle forms of victimization suffered by the multitudes of unmarried women after the war. In this novel, Mildred portrays the archetypal spinster who appears throughout Pym's entire canon and who is probably the author's chief concern because Pym herself was a spinster and suffered as a result. It is Mildred and her ilk who listen sympathetically to others' problems while serving a perfectly-brewed cup of tea, who pick up the pieces after some character's disaster, who collect and assort the jumble for sale at the church, and who constantly efface themselves because of an ingrained sense of their own lack of importance. Mildred would love to marry, but is convinced she is unsuitable because society places so little value upon her and others like her. She is one of Pym's many "excellent" women as the title suggests, who "'are not for marrying'" (EW189). As Sanford Radner asks of Pym's characters, "how can women find meaning in a world in which the experience of womanhood is felt to be deeply, fundamentally inferior?" (174).

The novel takes Mildred through a number of experiences in which she attempts to make herself more appealing to men and finally attracts several prospects. But the two men who would marry her choose her not for her pleasing personality or because of a warm sexual attraction toward her, but because of Mildred's

potential utility as a helpmeet. Even though Mildred claims at the beginning of the novel that she is "not at all like Jane Eyre, who must have given hope to so many plain women" (7), she nevertheless succeeds in attracting two characters very much like St. John Rivers in Bronte's novel, men who claim women as St. John does, "'not for . . . pleasure, but for . . . service'" (Bronte 420). Mildred holds no illusions about romance or even a transcendent love. She may be valued by the man she chooses, but never cherished. As Barbara Brothers argues, in Pym's novels, "Love is not portrayed as an intense sexual emotion" (67), and "if a woman insists on love as it is idealised in literature, she will likely remain a 'sleeping beauty'" (68).[2] In other words, if Mildred cannot give up her hopes for a romantic and loving liaison and settle instead for a practical and staid relationship, she will remain a spinster.

Many Pymian critics, such as Cooley, Strauss-Noll, Ackley, Rossen, Sadler, and Brothers have studied Pym's treatment of spinsters. Mason Cooley, for instance, states that Mildred in *Excellent Women* established a pattern of comedy "colored by sadness and yearning" (71) in Pym's spinster heroines for the rest of her career. Mildred and the other excellent women are well-educated, have close ties to the church, and live in London without the aid of a husband or lover, a family, or a real career (75). Unlike Jane Eyre, Pym's women do not expect to be made into heroines, nor do they expect to become the victors in great struggles in the way Bronte's heroine triumphs over Rochester. Rather, Pym's protagonists are more ignored than victimized (Cooley 83-84). Yet many of these excellent women fail to see themselves in this light, preferring to submerge themselves in good works and to find a comic, sardonic, and ironic view of life that makes the heartbreaks and disappointments bearable.

As Mary Strauss-Noll notes, "there is a curious mixture of

romance and cynicism in the attitude of most of Pym's single women" (73). Yet in spite of their knowledge of the disappointment entailed in marriage and the loss of their freedom, these women cling to the belief that to be wedded is superior to being a spinster. Strauss-Noll makes reference to Pym's unpublished "Finnish novel," in which a young woman describes an old spinster: "'She never married. Oh, the quiet finality of those words! It's like the shutting of a door. The very sound of them conjures up the whole of that woman's life'" (77). Even Mildred, the self-reliant excellent woman, prefers reading proofs and washing dishes for Everard Bone to her present state as "chief of the rejected ones" (EW 170). Mildred and Pym's other spinsters simply desire to love and be loved, even though only mildly at best, in return.

As Katherine Anne Ackley observes, these unmarried women, who are Pym's "special province" (34), have accepted the "prevailing social belief" that a woman is not fulfilled unless she is married (33). She says both men and women seek relationships because "men are privileged by them and women are validated by them," a fact which Pym underscores with wit and humor (34). Ackley explains that the development of the idea that spinsterhood is a dreaded condition goes back to Pym's days at Oxford University when there was a large imbalance in the sex ratio in England. Ackley cites a study by Jane Lewis of women in England between 1870 and 1950, whose conclusion is that women who were not married by their late twenties were not likely to marry. Lewis showed that "'of those women who were single and in their late twenties in 1921, fifty percent were unmarried a decade later'" (35). Therefore, according to Ackley, "because of the keen competition for husbands, spinsterhood was often called a 'failure in business' in middle class households" (35).

Pym's heroines illustrate the fear and disillusionment many women must have faced during this time over the unequal

distribution of men and women. And even though the numerical imbalance of sexes was a common fact known to the public, the general assumption remained that women "were not complete human beings" if they did not marry (35). Therefore, women found themselves cast into roles which required self-abasement and humility. Also, adds Lynn Veach Sadler, spinsters become the backbone of the English parish because society believes they will feel needed if they are used (144). Therefore, Mildred works in an office that assists impoverished gentlewomen, a position which carries little importance in the larger world. She is a tireless helper at church functions and a sympathetic listener and tea-bearer to those with problems.

Critics such as Sadler, Halperin, Rossen, and Ackley, who have studied Pym's men, agree that Pymian males are aware of and take advantage of their higher position in the social and professional hierarchies. The sense of male importance appears in all of Pym's novels, including those in this study, *Some Tame Gazelle, Excellent Women, Jane and Prudence, Less Than Angels,* and *A Glass of Blessings*, yet according to Sadler, Pym's ridicule and humor are "genial" (150). The men, she says, are just as "trapped in their stereotypes" as the spinsters who outnumber them (150). Nevertheless, they help to perpetuate the idea of man and his work "as hardly less important than that of divine messengers" (71). In their belief in their own superiority, Pymian men constantly subordinate women and find ways in which to use them. In *Excellent Women*, for instance, Everard Bone assures Mildred she will be worthwhile as a typist and proofreader; Rocky Napier treats her as though to make coffee or tea for him is a privilege and an honor. Similarly, in *A Glass of Blessings*, Rodney looks upon Wilmet's birthday dinner, which has been specially prepared for Wilmet by her mother-in-law Sybil, as no more than his due (GB 13).

Also, he prefers that Wilmet not have a career because his class and status are enhanced by having a wife who devotes herself entirely to his needs and their home.

John Halperin, who sees Pym's canon as containing nothing less than a war between the sexes, notes the ways in which men take advantage of and victimize women. He concludes that the war is unwinnable, and marriage itself is a "dead end" (95), as Wilmet discovers early in *A Glass of Blessings*. Part of the problem is that Pym sees men as the weaker vessels; therefore, an irony develops regarding the respect men crave and believe they deserve and the knowledge of the women that their own "advice and strength" are "sometimes greater than [men's]" (GB 165). Wilmet realizes that "I with my sheltered life was in some ways more fitted to deal with certain things" (201) than Rodney, who had had an impressive university education and who now holds a prominent position in the Civil Service. Even with this knowledge, women continue to subordinate themselves and to place men's needs above their own.

Besides observing the uneven balance of power between the sexes, critics notice that Pym's men prefer to marry attractive women, like Allegra Gray and Helena Napier in *Excellent Women*, rather than the more selfless and talented spinsters so prevalent in the canon. Ackley notes that although Pymian men believe they want women who are sexy, attractive, and bright, in reality they want women who will cook and wash for them, women who will prevent the moths from eating their clothes (EW 52). Everard Bone, for instance in *Excellent Women,* wants Mildred to cook, wash, type indexes, and act as a buffer between himself and his mother. Marriage with him will become a trade-off in which she swaps her skills at cooking and indexing for the reward of simply having a man (Rossen, *The World of Barbara Pym* 61). In her study on the relationship between men and women, Ackley concludes that both Pym's men and women want love and marriage but notes the

"ridiculous lengths" they go to attain those things (71). The expectations surrounding romance and marriage simply place too much of a burden on women in a society in which there are too few males.

In addition, a number of Pymian critics have studied the constant undercurrent of irony in Pym's canon, indicating the author's awareness of the ways in which women are victimized by men, by cultural indoctrination in matters of love and marriage, and by an idealized view of life presented in fiction and the popular imagination. But Pym attacked the popular myth that promised women a handsome prince and an exciting life, exposing the ways in which reality fails to live up to the fantasy. One of the ways Pym uses irony is in the marriage relationship, and her novels that deal with married characters constantly expose the discrepancy in the popularized version of love and marriage and its reality, for as Sun-Hee Lee asserts, these women discover that "marriage weakens love and ends dreams of romantic love" (2). Lee continues that "Pym presents married women's disappointments as unavoidable, natural by-products of their status" (2).

John Bayley defines this major concern of Pym as an indication of her dualism, the premise in the author's comedy which reveals the contrast of the two worlds we live in, one characterized by "extreme triviality" (53) typified by work, social exchanges, and the daily matters of eating, drinking and living. On the other hand, the romantic paradigm permeates our culture and thoughts, appealing to our desire for love and intense feeling. As Bayley states, "Nothing would be easier than for a novelist to systematise this contrast and purposefully point it up" (53). Indeed, Pym exposes the contrast throughout her fiction. In *A Glass of Blessings*, for example, Wilmet must face the irony of her own marriage and the dualistic nature of life. While Wilmet appears on the outside to have

everything, she nevertheless faces a bleak inner life that is devoid of emotion, humor, or fulfillment. Her days are consumed with the trivial details of living, while her private mind craves romantic escape. If she is to achieve harmony and break through the forces which bring about her suffering, she will have to reconcile the disparate directions of her life.

Similarly, Pym's spinsters are aware of the irony in their lives too. Although unmarried women like Mildred in *Excellent Women* and Mary Beamish in *A Glass of Blessings* realize they do not fit into the popular romantic paradigm because of their lack of attractiveness and their relative unimportance in the male world, they nevertheless crave love and a sense of being needed as a natural function of their humanity. And even though the two women find husbands by the end of the novels (an atypical outcome in Pym's canon), Mildred especially understands that life will be a far cry from the romantic imaginings of her youth. Mildred's married life will be calm and restrained as she becomes Everard's typist, domestic helper, and partner. Mary Beamish will relinquish her small inherited fortune and become helpmeet to her new husband, the priest Marius Ransome, whom Wilmet feels is unstable and inferior to Mary. Even though both women are aware of the ironies of their situations, they nevertheless make their own choices. While Mary is blissfully happy at the prospect of serving another person tirelessly and selflessly, Mildred is merely resigned to her future and decides that to be useful and needed is preferable to being alone.

Whether one should declare Pym's heroines victims or victors at the end of their stories depends upon how the reader sees the heroine seeing herself. Certainly, the protagonists do not ride into the sunset with strong, virile men at the reins; instead, they become "very resourceful at eking out their pleasures," for as Isa Kapp reports, these women are "masters (or mistresses) of making do" (238). Pymian characters do not experience great transformations

or great romances like those found in some pre-modern works (e.g., Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* or Comtesse de La Fayette's *The Princess of Cleves*) or in popular novels, but they do come to a point of understanding and acceptance in their lives as the structural paradigm suggests: recognition => adjustment => acceptance.

The paradigm that reflected Barbara Pym's vision of life throughout her work is radically different from that constructed by Fay Weldon, born in 1933 in Worcestershire, England. A novelist, playwright, and television and radio script writer, Weldon has fifteen novels and over fifty plays to her credit, most of which deal with the experience of women. Weldon, who has been likened to Charles Dickens for her narrative verve and to Jonathan Swift for her satiric bite (Mackay 85), has received the Society of Film and Television Arts award for best series, 1971; the Writer's Guild award for best radio play in 1973 and 1978; the Booker McConnell Prize nomination for *Praxis* in 1979; and the Los Angeles Times Award for Fiction in 1989 for *The Heart of the Country*. *Contemporary Literary Criticism* reports that for the last fifteen years, every Weldon novel has been a best seller in Great Britain (CLC 59, 233). In addition, her comic tone and playful style consistently capture the critics' notice and bring about one reviewer's evaluation that Weldon's "structure, narrative techniques, point of view, style, and humor place them among the finest achievements in recent fiction by women" (Krouse 9). Weldon's "sinfully delicious amalgam of Victorian vigor, feminist consciousness-raising, black humor and supernatural hijinks" contrast her work with the spare standards of much modern fiction today (Mackay 85). Furthermore, says Allan Massie in an assessment of the British novel from 1970 through 1989, Weldon's clarity and "ruthlessness of vision" in the novels she wrote during the 1970's represent the sharpest statement of the feminist position in British

fiction (38).

Weldon's novels most often deal with the subjects of sexual initiation, marriage, infidelity, divorce, contraception, abortion, motherhood, housework, and thwarted careers (Krouse 5). In her persistently feminist and iconoclastic view, Weldon mirrors the insights of feminist theorists that love does not last, marriage is not happy, and motherhood is not serene (6). Cruel and insensitive men, unenlightened women, and an impersonal social system add to the protagonists' sense of indignation and rage. Therefore, in her novels Weldon exposes the "inauthenticity and bad faith" of both her male and female characters (Wilde 409); the male establishment's standard of beauty and feminine worthiness and women's willingness to subscribe to these, even if they cause sacrifice, discomfort, and pain (PW Interview 83); and the significance of women's friendships. In a *Publisher's Weekly* interview, Weldon, whose novels have been translated into eleven languages, emphasizes the fact that women's predicaments seem to be cross-cultural where large, aspiring middle classes exist. She tells Steinberg that in her work she attempts to make women ask themselves: "What is it that will give me fulfillment? That's the serious question I'm attempting to answer" (84).

In light of this objective, Weldon tries to find ways to help her characters break out of and renounce the role of victim, while finding healthier, alternative ways of being. Therefore, the novels considered in this study fit into the following structural pattern:

recognition => rebellion => victory

The recognition stage of a character's development can come early in the novel as it does with Ruth in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, or it may come close to the end after a long, arduous and difficult journey of self-discovery as it does in *Praxis* or with Chloe in *Female Friends*. Once the heroine finally recognizes or admits to

her victimization and abuse, she goes through a period of rebellion, at the end of which she emerges more clear-eyed and determined. From there, she takes steps to insure herself of a victory, usually qualified, over the forces that have victimized her. Although Weldon occasionally writes novels of different subject matter and emphasis, she seems overwhelmingly drawn to the subject of female emancipation and the recognition and rebellion necessary to achieve that state.

Even though Weldon's novels have at their heart the communal experience of women, the battle of the sexes is usually the factor that first forces the protagonists to confront the painful issues in their relationships. The most frequent portrayal of man is unsympathetic and unflattering, involving males who are cruel and insensitive to their women, men who flaunt their power in games of sexual prowess, domination, and oppression. In love, in marriage and in their roles as father, these men fail their women miserably in terms of fidelity and in financial and emotional support. In addition many Weldon novels deal with submissive middle-aged protagonists who lose their men to younger women promising greater domestic serenity and renewed sexual vigor. This is what happens to Chloe in *Female Friends* and to Ruth in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil,* both of whose husbands openly seek other women to fuel their egos. Yet despite years of abuse, these women manage through a process of recognition and rebellion to break out of their roles as victim and move to the next stage in their lives.

Often, this next stage involves finding a source of strength from within or learning how to rely on their female friends as the mainstays of comfort and support while they transform themselves from passive victims to active participants in their own fates. As one critic remarks, in a Weldon novel, "Men come and go, but the relationships between women endure" (Krouse 8). Weldon is most often praised for her early novels, according to the reviewer of

Contemporary Literary Criticism, which examine the successes and failures of sisterhood by creating female characters related through blood or friendship (CLC 36, 443). However, each novel, while dealing with the breakdown of both male and female relationships, emphasizes a different aspect of the female experience. In *The Fat Woman's Joke*, Weldon's first novel, which is considered an apprentice work, the author introduces Esther, a middle-aged and overweight woman, who feels "the exploitation inherent in a married woman's lot" (Krouse 9). Her husband has resorted to violence and adultery, leaving her to contemplate her misery in a squalid flat, where she gorges herself to greater proportions and reveals her story in flashbacks to visitors. Like most Weldon narratives, this one ends on a note of hope (or a qualified victory) when Esther regains her self-respect and her husband's appreciation during a separation from him. Reviewing the novel when it was re-issued along with eleven short stories in *Watching Me, Watching You*, Mary Cantwell notes that everything that is of concern to Weldon throughout her canon "is already sprung full-blown in *The Fat Woman's Joke*" (CLC 36, 445).

Therefore, with several exceptions, the issues of sexual politics and female loyalty are the subject of every novel henceforth. Before Weldon women can distill the importance of female solidarity and support, however, they must first examine the role they play in the gender hierarchy of domestic affairs. Part of her characters' mystification over their treatment by men stems from Weldon's own background in which she was brought up in a family of women--her grandmother, her mother, and her sister--and perceived the centrality and importance of women in her experience. She tells *Vogue* magazine that she was "brought up to believe the world was female; [but] men believe otherwise" (184). In her much discussed *Down Among the Women*, a more ambitious novel than her first,

Weldon drew on her own background while portraying three generations of women from 1950 through 1970, who discover the communal nature of women's experience. In this novel, Byzantia, the illegitimate daughter of Scarlet, embodies hope for female independence through rebellion.

By the time Weldon wrote her third novel, *Female Friends*, she had become adept at handling the interrelationships of multiple female characters in her narratives. Described as "emotionally bleak but splendidly written" (Rev. of *Female Friends, Publisher's Weekly* 52), this novel deals with three women who are brought together as children during the evacuation of London in World War II. Now in their forties, they face their ravaged lives with a shared sense of cooperation and strength they develop after surviving their unpleasant childhoods and destructive relationships with men. The story weaves back and forth from present to past, most often through the eyes of Chloe as she explores the crisis of her marriage. Her husband Oliver is having an affair with their cook Françoise and takes every chance to denigrate, humiliate, or subjugate his wife, including persuading her to join him in bed with Françoise one night, then accusing her of being a lesbian once she capitulates.

Chloe's friends, Marjorie and Grace, can be antagonistic and cruel at times; nevertheless, the three maintain their sisterly bond because of a shared sense of suffering during the war when they grew up together. These friends, according to Sara Blackburn, "gossip unforgivably about one another, are exasperated by one another's dependencies, find endless, carping fault with the others' too-easy acceptance of humiliation, inflict devastating criticism upon one another for their respective willingness to be used by men" (18). Yet they love one another and see mirrored in their friends' inadequacies "their own unending struggles for self-esteem and autonomy" (18). At the end of the novel, having gone through years of abuse, abortions, miscarriages, thwarted educations and careers,

the women grow into understanding and compassion as they reflect on the suicide of Midge, who suffered starvation at the hands of her successful, but stingy, artist-husband: "'We should interfere more in each other's lives, and not just pick up pieces. . . . We just stood back and let her die'" (220-21). Marjorie also provides the impetus for Chloe's rebellion against and rejection of Oliver by offering a house to Chloe and her five children. Learning that a middle-aged, submissive woman can change if she has female friends, Chloe is finally able to break out of her victimization by her emotionally abusive husband and establish her own independence.

Even though the women in *Female Friends* finally learn to accept and nurture one another, Weldon females often act as ghastly toward their sisters as men do. Never sentimental about her female characters, Weldon admits in an interview that her women are "terrible creatures" (*Novelists in Interview* 313) who betray one another until they absorb the concept of sisterhood. Weldon tells Haffenden, "When women can survive by themselves, and have a man as a matter of choice, an optional extra, women are far less ready to see men as possessions or other women as competitors or rivals" (315). However, the female protagonists in *Remember Me* have not reached a point of independence, nor have they absorbed the ideas of the women's movement. Therefore, the novel includes in its panorama of themes this sense of rivalry over men, of female betrayal of other women, and women's complicity in their own victimization.

Like *Female Friends*, *Remember Me* is a novel that deals with multiple female characters, and like its predecessor, this novel is replete with victims, women who suffer the drudgery and invisibility of being housewives, who put their men and children before themselves as a matter of habit, women for whom the idea of happiness and self-fulfillment is suspect if not downright

impossible to achieve. The novel also includes one of Weldon's impossible-to-like women, Lily, who manipulates and drives her husband, disregards the special needs of her toddler son, and mistreats her step-daughter. As in other Weldon novels, the husbands in this one are childish, thoughtless, egocentric and/or self-indulgent although both they and their women have documented personal heritages that help readers to understand them.

Described by Lynn Sharon Schwartz as an "urbane tale of middle-class marital reshuffling, proliferating guilt, resentment, awkward dinner parties, and leftover children. . ." (560), the novel focuses on the revenge of a jilted ex-wife who dies early in the tale, then comes back to haunt, so to speak, her ex-husband and his new wife, Lily, through the medium of another main character, Margot. Gentle, undervalued Margot gradually assumes the feistiness of Madeleine, the wronged first wife, and exacts Madeleine's revenge on the offending couple. Somehow, Margot, described during this period as Margot/Madeleine, absorbs enough of Madeleine's energy and anger to force her family to recognize her and capitulate to her demand to bring Hilary, the architect's and Madeleine's daughter, into their family. Only by admitting her oppression at home and by rebelling against the status quo can she begin to feel she holds some power in the household, and only then can her family return to an adjusted sense of equilibrium. This, she accomplishes. By the time of the funeral, Margot/Madeleine achieves an admission of guilt and apology from Jarvis and Lily and the settlement of Madeleine's daughter with Margot's family rather than with Jarvis and Lily. Even the spoiled step-mother extraordinaire, who almost loses her son Jonathan to Madeleine's revenge, learns to appreciate the fragility of life and love, vowing to be a better mother and step-mother in the future.

Even though Lily is an unlikeable character in *Remember Me*, and ex-wife Madeleine behaves badly, neither of these characters

compares with Ruth in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil,* another story of a wife scorned, abandoned, and determined to wreak godless revenge upon the craven ex-husband. In this controversial and engaging neo-Gothic fable (Glastonbury 24), however, Weldon explores the ways in which unattractive women are undervalued and ignored. The ugly, lumpish Ruth, mother of two and wife of attractive and sexy Bobbo, loses her husband because of her unattractiveness and clumsiness at home. Over six feet tall and not feminine like the heroines of romantic fiction, she discovers her husband has fallen in love with the beautiful, petite, and blonde Mary Fisher, the rich and successful writer of romance novels who lives alone by the sea in her elegant High Tower. Bobbo leaves his wife and moves in with Mary Fisher. From here, the novel becomes a revenge drama of the furious Ruth, who burns her house down, delivers her children over to her husband, and vows to destroy Bobbo and Mary with the claim, "I want revenge. I want power. I want money. I want to love and not love in return" (49).

For Ruth, says James Lasdun, "Revenge becomes its own *raison d étre"* (63). Although Ruth's vengeance is undeniable and inescapable, Weldon prompts the reader to examine the subject of female rage and the excessive length to which some women will go (if only in a fantasy) to achieve justice once they learn to harness power for themselves. As Ruth ruminates at the end, "somehow it is not a matter of male or female, after all; it never was: merely of power" (277).

The Life and Loves of a She-Devil follows the paradigm of other Weldon novels of recognition => rebellion => victory; however, critics rightly question the efficacy of Ruth's victory because by novel's end, she has helped to bring about the early death of Mary Fisher, has reduced her husband to a pathetic weakling, and has transformed herself into the image of her former enemy at

incalculable physical and emotional cost. In fact, she muses at the end that Mary Fisher is a woman who "made the landscape better. She-devils can make nothing better, except themselves. In the end, she wins" (266). Not all critics agree with Ruth, nevertheless. To the extent that the novel is a revenge drama, according to Drexler, "she took revenge as far as it would go. She was mad as a hatter, but never mind, one must do what one must do" (47).

Obviously, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* has a great deal to say about the plight of plain women and their natural desire for beauty, acceptance, and love in a society which often forces them to become mere appendages to men; moreover, even attractive females in her novels find they are used by men as tools for their success. Often, Weldon's female protagonists subjugate their own careers and educations in order to please domineering males who want attractive wives to keep their homes and entertain their business friends with gourmet dinners produced at budget prices after the woman's full day at work. Both Oliver in *Female Friends* and Willie in *Praxis* persuade their women to give up their educations in order to help them achieve their own goals. Even so, both Praxis and Chloe take jobs in which they find themselves either supporting the entire household on their meager earnings or accepting menial jobs in an attempt to evade their stingy men. Chloe of *Female Friends* wants to work to help provide for her children, but her husband wants her home to oversee the running of his house. In spite of him, she takes a job far beneath her capacity but turns down a promotion because she would have to arrive home later than her husband, a fact which would cause friction between them.

Weldon's novels make it all too clear that not only do men expect too much of women, but women to some degree participate in their own victimization by capitulating to male standards and domination. The result is nothing less than tired, miserable wives, full of rage and occasionally pushed to irrationality, violence, or

insanity. As Margaret Chesnutt observes, Weldon dramatizes in her novels the socialization process that has shaped these characters into passive male-pleasers and the social myths and norms that have prevented them from achieving their own self-fulfillment (8). Chloe, for instance, always a hard-working and dutiful daughter, has been conditioned since childhood by her mother to "Understand and forgive" (FF 5). She finally admits in her forties after a lifetime of placating husband and children that "the effort has quite exhausted me" (5). In an article in *Vogue*, Weldon states, "What women want most of all is permission to suffer. They think they have to stand in the center of some family unit and sop up all the terrible feelings around them and feel nothing themselves. I tell them that's wrong" (184).

Weldon's prescription to relieve the sad state of affairs between men and women, then, involves perceiving sexual relationships in a new way. According to Annis Pratt in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, Weldon emphasizes in her work the need for both men and women to rid themselves of the stigmas of gender. "Personhood," she says, "must be a better tool for survival" (69) since "Gender norms, for poor women as for rich ones, are so destructive that they should be abandoned and alternatives explored" (69-70). Pratt perceives Weldon as imploring men and women to seek a new environment where "'maleness' and 'femaleness' no longer undermine the development of the human personality" (70). To this end, Weldon seeks a solution through transcending sexual politics to a new environment, "a new kind of space" (70). The ending of *Down Among the Women* reflects Weldon's hope for the new generation (embodied in Byzantia) to begin the process of shunning old norms and seeking a new kind of human consciousness, free of gender limitations:

> Byzantia, like her grandmother Wanda, is a destroyer, not a builder. But where Wanda struggles against the tide and

gave up, exhausted, Byzantia has it behind her, full and strong.

Down among the women.

We are the last of the women. (222)

Praxis, considered by some critics as Weldon's best novel, is another narrative that explores the subject of women's nature and how both men and women perpetuate negative stereotypes, a fact which Weldon obviously sees as contrary to female interests. In her Haffenden interview, Weldon asserts, "I do feel that women have to fight as much against their own natures as against the world or against men's behaviour" (*Novelists in Interview* 312). This is the conclusion Praxis Duveen comes to, a protagonist much like Chloe in *Female Friends*, who has such a bad time that she seems to represent the female condition itself, according to Rosemary Dinnage (21). The novel traces the life of Praxis from childhood to middle age through a series of flashbacks and first-person narration. She has an insane mother, an absent father, and a cruel, half-mad sister; put upon and betrayed by every person in the novel, she gives up her education to live with a man she barely likes, becomes a prostitute to escape him, only to end up with several other men who similarly undervalue or abuse her. After being abandoned by her husband for a younger, more beautiful woman, Praxis must face the consequences of the poor decisions she has made in life. With the help of Irma, an ex-wife turned feminist, Praxis confronts her own complicity in her victimization as well as the ways in which she had carelessly demeaned all women in her job as an advertising writer. For the first time in her life, she learns the meaning of true commitment--to women and to herself--even if that commitment requires pain, isolation, and self-sacrifice. At novel's end, she is alone and broken, having lost her children, her friends, the men in her life, and having served a jail sentence for smothering a retarded

infant of a friend on the grounds of practicality and compassion.

Praxis's hard-won knowledge about women's suffering as she ruminates over the events that have brought her to poverty and ill-health is that, "we must fight nature tooth and claw. . . . Nature does not know best; for the birds, for the bees, for the cows; for men, perhaps. But your interests and Nature's do not coincide" (133). Women, she sees, are victims of the procreative energies of nature and man's propensity for dominance and self-interest. Broken as she is, however, Weldon offers a small ray of hope for Praxis. She reaches, one might argue, a state of equilibrium, and in doing so emphasizes Weldon's belief that it is possible to go beyond gender norms into a new kind of space. Even though things appear cautiously optimistic at best for Praxis at the end, she is poised on the brink of a new state of being; therefore, although her victory may appear extremely qualified, it nevertheless offers hope that Praxis is making a new way, not only for herself but for those coming after her.

Like Pym and Weldon, Margaret Atwood has had from the beginning of her career the particular concerns of modern women. Beginning her writing career just about the time that Pym was finishing hers, Atwood, a native of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, took as her province the problems which she saw afflicting women much in the same way Pym and Weldon concentrated on the plight of modern women. However, all three writers capture not only the difficulties women face in Canada and in England, but articulate also the essence of being a woman in the twentieth century in a way that defies place. Hence, Pym, Atwood, and Weldon appeal to diverse audiences of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic levels because their novels deal in a cross-cultural way with the quest for identity and the search for a place of well-being and fulfillment within their environments.

Atwood (1939 -) began her writing career as a poet, publishing several well-received volumes of poetry before penning her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, in 1969. After a stint of graduate study at Harvard University from 1962-63, Atwood taught English literature at several universities and served as editor of the House of Anansi Press in Toronto. Since that time she has published ten books of poetry, seven novels, and three collections of short stories. Her latest novel, *The Robber Bride*, appeared in 1993.

The author has won numerous literary awards, for her fiction most notably the Governor General's Award in 1986 for *The Handmaid's Tale*, her first best seller in the United States. The same novel also won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award in 1986 and was short-listed for the Booker Prize. *Cat's Eye*, which appeared in 1989, was again a best seller in the United States and was also short-listed for the Booker Prize. Combining elements of both realism and romance (Grace *Violent Duality* 80), Atwood has proved herself to be a versatile as well as a controversial writer, one who has been labeled as feminist, nationalist, and most recently activist for human rights (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 19). Since 1974, Atwood has been widely recognized as English Canada's foremost writer (McCombs *Margaret Atwood* 8).

Perhaps the author's most controversial undertaking has been the publication of *Survival* in 1972, a thematic guide to Canadian literature, in which she introduced a political manifesto and her own personal statement (Atwood, *Survival* 13) about the crippled state of Canadian arts due to colonialism and the exploitation of her country and its resources. In this study, the author defines most clearly a theme that had been at the heart of her early poetic and novelistic pursuits: victimization of Canada and its peoples. As many critics have noted, the themes and concerns Atwood raises in *Survival* appear again and again in her fiction. Of particular

relevance is the victim theory with its concept of struggle for survival (Grace *Violent Duality* 3). To refuse to be victimized becomes a moral imperative in *Survival* and in Atwood's fictional work as well as the idea that acquiescence does not absolve one from guilt or remove responsibility (3). According to George Woodcock, the message of *Survival* goes beyond the recognition of one's victimization to the stages of self-exploration and growth (100).

In order to grow, however, individuals must become aware of their position in the struggle for survival; therefore, *Survival* outlines four "Basic Victim Positions" that Atwood extrapolates from her reading of Canadian literature of this century, chiefly from the thirties through the sixties:

1) Position One is a denial of the victimization;
2) Position Two is admitting the victimization, but saying it is insoluble;
3) Position Three is acknowledging the victimization and repudiating the victim role, getting mad at the cause and deciding on action;
4) Position Four is being a creative non-victim (Atwood *Survival* 37-39).

This last position, Atwood admits, is difficult to achieve because it refers to people who have never been victims at all, or to ex-victims, who are no longer tempted by the role. One can move into Position Four only if the external and/or internal causes of victimization have been removed, a fact which is difficult or impossible to achieve in modern society (38-39).

The ideal, Atwood said in a 1973 interview with Graeme Gibson, "would be somebody who would neither be a killer or a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world" (*Eleven Canadian Novelists* 27). In this study, Atwood asserted that if her country were to survive as a nation, it had to learn to look to its

own culture, especially its literature, for a unique Canadian identity. *Survival* worked, declares McCombs, and became the handbook for Canadians eager to establish their own cultural identity (*Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood* 7). However, the true value of *Survival* for critics of Atwood's fiction, says Marge Piercy, is that it reveals the author's attitudes towards her own choices as a writer (54).

Throughout *Survival* and Atwood's poetry and fiction, the author constantly asks who is responsible for victimization. The answer, says Barbara Hill Rigney, is almost always the self (48). Atwood's ubiquitous thesis in her novels has been the necessity for women to recognize their victimization and their own complicity in the process and to find new ways of being which reject cultural attitudes and patterns that denigrate or subordinate women; in other words, she exhorts women to take Basic Position Four, even though such a choice may involve repudiation by society. Therefore the action of an Atwood plot often begins with a journey of self-discovery by a protagonist who is not very articulate at the beginning of her adventure nor, according to Rigney, very heroic (1). During the course of her story, she must discover what it is that prevents her from being a mature, communicative, self-actualized human being. Rigney adds that the protagonists, several of whom are unreliable first-person narrators, may be a bit mad, fragmented, or isolated (1).

Marian McAlpin, for instance, the heroine of Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1970), is a young, college-educated market researcher, who becomes engaged to an ambitious lawyer. Unconsciously, Marian rebels against her fiance's ordinariness and consumerism, as well as his insistence on gender-specific roles in their relationship. He attempts to make her into the image of a young lawyer's wife: attractive and sexy, a woman who enjoys entertaining, caring for, and subordinating herself and her career to

her man's. Twice during the course of events, Marian takes flight from Peter, literally running away from him without a moment's notice or an awareness of her own reasons for fleeing. In her rejection of the role forced upon her, Marian unconsciously identifies with the idea of being consumed and therefore becomes unable to eat, at first only meat, but finally, even vegetarian sources of nourishment. Realizing at last that her upcoming marriage poses a threat to her health, autonomy, and sanity, Marian bakes a large cake for her fiance in the shape of a woman and invites him to consume it instead of her, for as she warns him, "You've been trying to assimilate me" (ED 279). Horrified, he flees and their relationship ends. But Marian is left with an awareness that she had not had before, that she had participated in her own victimization by attempting to fulfill the role he and society had dictated to her. With new-found knowledge and determination, Marian can prevent the same treatment in future relationships by refusing to be a victim. Therefore, Atwood's first novel sets forth a structural paradigm that controls the narrative action in this and a number of other novels by the author:

recognition => flight => renunciation

The pattern which proved efficacious in her first novel served equally as well in her second novel, the 1972 sensation, *Surfacing*, a book which Francine du Plessix Gray termed "one of the most important novels of the 20th-century" (132). In this work, Atwood articulates her concerns for all victims: animals, humans, the environmental. Considered a modern feminist classic, *Surfacing*, a novel in the *kuntslerroman* tradition, chronicles a two-week period in the life of an unnamed narrator, a young artist who returns to her father's cabin in northern Quebec with her boyfriend and another couple because she has learned her father is missing. In her search for him, she must confront the haunting facts of her past, such as her relationship with her parents and an affair with a married man

who had forced an unwanted abortion upon her. In addition, she must come to terms with the painful reality of the rape of her country and its precious resources by Americans and Canadians alike.

The remembrance and recognition of these events only add to her current inability to communicate or to function fully in her career or her relationships. Traveling with a lover and another couple, the narrator searches for her father, who had been recording ancient Indian pictographs he discovered on rock walls on the surrounding islands. On one of her dives at the site of wall etchings, she discovers the remains of her father as well as the keys to her past and her present dilemma. At the end of her experience, she returns an enlightened, re-born individual who determines, "This above all, to refuse to be a victim" (ED 233). Like Marian in *The Edible Woman,* she realizes her own complicity in the way she has been treated by her lover and friends, her employer, and in the destruction and abuse of her native land. She concludes, "I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone" (ED 233). After recognition and flight, this renunciation takes the heroine to a new stage in her life, one in which she will confront injustice, speak up for her own needs, and decry the destruction of her land.

While keeping to her pattern of recognition => flight => renunciation, Atwood turned her attention in *Cat's Eye* to the ways in which friendships sometimes form the basis for the most destructive of relationships. Anna's role in *Surfacing* first exemplifies the dangers of female friendship, but the novel has other concerns at least as prominent if not more so than that of female treachery toward other females. However, in *Cat's Eye,* Atwood focuses specifically on the ways in which female friendships often lead to distrust and alienation. Like *Surfacing,* this realistic novel deals with an artist, and while the earlier

novel's protagonist is much younger, this one focuses on a woman in her 50's who is returning to her former hometown for a retrospective showing at a local gallery in Toronto. Being in the town again gives the artist a chance to relive her terrifying childhood memories, in which she was castigated, humiliated, and finally abandoned by three friends after she fell through the ice on a frozen ravine under a bridge. Confronting her haunting past in the present, in much the same way the narrator of *Surfacing* does, Elaine Risley finally comes to terms with her trauma, realizing that she has subsequently been an agent as well as the object of victimization. When she admits to herself her own abuse and abandonment of Cordelia, the leader of the group, Elaine becomes a more complete and integrated person.

The structural paradigm of recognition => flight => renunciation, occurs in the portion of the novel which covers the activities of the young Elaine. When she suffers the abuse under the bridge, during which time she is mythically submerged under the water and prays for and receives in a mystical way the help of Virgin Mary, Elaine renounces her friends from that point onward. Her flight is metaphoric because although she continues to live at home with her parents, she totally ignores her former friends, refusing to acknowledge them or fall into their company again, except for the re-establishment of her friendship with Cordelia in high school--on her own terms. The treatment she received at age ten is so painful that she represses the memory of it. However, the pictures hanging at the gallery attest to the indelible imprint of the experience on the artist's psyche. As the mature artist looks back upon her subsequent behavior towards the girls, she must acknowledge her emotional abandonment of the leader of the group, a friend who acted out against Elaine her own sense of loneliness and despair. It is impossible for Elaine to erase the awful force of her vengeance upon her former friend, but the recognition of her own errors allows

her to grow in insight, compassion, and self-awareness.

In their quests for identity and strength, Atwood's characters often conform to mythic archetypes. In the case of *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye*, their journeys require of them the ancient ritual of submergence into water or a flight into a non-human netherworld. The narrator of *Surfacing*, for instance, takes a literal dive underwater to discover the body of her missing father and to unlock the key to her current suffering. Most critics notice how these adventures conform to Joseph Campbell's monomyth, in which the hero follows a prescribed pattern: "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 35).

The ritualistic descent (or separation from the world) may be in metaphoric form, as happens in the case of Elaine Risley in *Cat's Eye*. Her submergence is actual, but it takes place under a bridge during the frozen winter as a horrific climax of years of abuse by her friends. Although the fall into the water is accidental, the mythic transformation takes place as Elaine struggles for the strength to pull herself from the insidious ice. Her prayers bring about a vision of a Virgin Mary goddess (penetration to a source of power), and from her, the young victim emerges from the water, injured and physically weak, but with a new spiritual resolve that protects her from future harm by the girls (life-enhancing return).

Atwood's protagonists (I hesitate to use the term heroines because the author does not particularly see her women characters as heroic and in fact finds most twentieth-century fiction devoid of traditional heroes [*Malahat Review* 13]) must not always literally submerge themselves in order to fulfill their mythic obligations. They sometimes fulfill their mission through a journey into a subconscious underworld. After her dive into the waters of Quebec, for instance, the narrator of *Surfacing* finds that the discovery of

her father and the acknowledgment of her former sins still do not provide her with the spiritual insight she seeks. Therefore, she leaves the realm of the human world for several days, during which time she subsists alone on her isolated island as part-animal, in an anti-linguistic and unclothed state (she is allowed a blanket until she grows fur), unable to partake of human food or protection. This part of her journey, which is a psychological as well as physical immersion into the world of nature, functions as a continuation of the earlier immersion in water. Receiving spiritual insight, she returns to the linguistic, human, and imperfect world with the knowledge that she must work out her destiny in human terms with flawed human beings.

Not all of Atwood's novels involve the mythical flight or retreat of the main character after which she returns enlightened or renewed. Sometimes, as in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale,* the flight is more literal and takes place at the end of the novel. More prominent in this novel, however, is the idea of the emotional flight of the protagonist, which takes the form of evasion or withdrawal from ethical action. Atwood's first work of speculative fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, was a great departure from her previous work. The novel presents a chilling look into the near future extrapolated from current events and trends that Atwood had observed throughout the world. This dystopian fiction expresses most deeply the author's observations and concerns about the victimization of women, of democratic heritage, and of the environment. The story focuses on the Republic of Gilead, formerly the United States, during the early twenty-first century. After the ultra-right, Protestant theocratic system of government takes over, its inhumane laws force women into slavery in narrowly defined and repressive roles. Because super-pollution and super-disease have diminished the birth rate to dismally low proportions, the heroine Offred (whose name is derived from the possessive "of" attached to

her commander's name "Fred") has been kidnapped away from her husband and child in order to become a breeder or surrogate womb for a wealthy, childless couple.

In the novel, Offred, who is referred to as a handmaid after the biblical model, chronicles the effects of living in a totalitarian world. The system breeds constant distrust of all people, for any person might be a government-planted spy. All members of society share in the guilt and responsibility of maintaining the anti-utopia by being forced to take part in its inhuman practices. For instance, handmaids are forced to participate in Salvagings (public executions) and Particicution (in which women are given the opportunity to tear men apart limb by limb). Their desire to absolve themselves from guilt only serves to intensify their psychic suffering. In this novel, Atwood shows the ways in which apathy allows people to put themselves into the position of becoming victims and the ways in which fear prevents people from taking action once they have become victimized. Out of fear, Offred capitulates to the fascist regime, believing, as had the narrator in *Surfacing* before her, that nothing she can do will change the system. In this way, Atwood points out and emphasizes the complicity of Offred and the entire society for allowing the present situation to have occurred.

The renunciation scene, which appears so boldly in the first two novels, is implicit in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred never specifically renounces her position in a stunning recognition scene in the way the narrator of *Surfacing* does; nevertheless, the very facts of her life as she describes them in a series of thirty cassette tapes she narrates and hides in an old Army supply box attest to the villanies and repression Offred and others suffer. Her gradual commitment to subversive activity in light of the fact that she is neither a very strong nor courageous person indicates the burden of responsibility Atwood places upon human beings if they are to

remain in control of their lives and their environments.

Even though vast numbers of readers have found Atwood's novels enormously satisfying, one criticism of her early work has been that she takes her protagonists to the stage of renunciation, then abandons them (see Rigney, Woodcock, Grace's *Violent Duality*, Robinson, and Piercy). The action of the novels draws to a close, leaving open the question of how the protagonists are to carry on their lives henceforth. Recognizing and renouncing victimization is one thing; being a creative non-victim is another. At the end of *The Edible Woman*, for instance, readers wonder what Marian will do once she has broken off with her fiance and quit her job. She is headed toward the arms of another man, Duncan, who will be as destructive as Peter, only in different ways. Society will not change just because she has denounced its clawing subjugation of individuals to a pre-packaged consumer ideal. Her immediate complications are solved, but as Atwood tells Sandler, "not in a way that reaffirms the social order" (13).

Similarly, the conclusion of *Surfacing* involves the narrator's renunciation of victimization, yet she reunites with and gets herself pregnant by Joe, her emotionally brutish boyfriend. Also, one wonders how is she to stop what Margaret Lawrence calls the wounding and killing of Earth (47). Atwood admits the ending of *Surfacing* is ambiguous, claiming that "I fill in what I know, and after that anybody's guess is as good as mine" (*Malahat Review* 12). At least, she asserts, the heroine of *Surfacing* does not end where she began, and the movement in the novel is a spiral rather than a circle (13-14). *Cat's Eye* moves even closer to a sense of resolution because the child Elaine had handled her situation with Cordelia by severing her ties with the girl. The adult Elaine must come to understand that she and her friend were both losers in their struggle to denigrate, ignore, or harm one another. Elaine does not

emerge as a victor because she has lost a valuable part of herself by failing to forgive Cordelia and to help her when she was desperate. She does emerge, however, with insight into what has driven her in her personal and artistic life.

Atwood's most recent novel, *The Robber Bride* (1993), also deals with women and how they, like Elaine in *Cat's Eye*, must learn to depend upon one another if they are to survive. But this novel is unique, for it shows the continuing evolution in Atwood's fiction as she forges into new fictional territory, one in which the protagonists, out of long-standing support and encouragement of one another, manage to avoid the pattern of flight found in earlier novels and to work out a true resolution based on mutual interdependence. Renunciation is no longer enough; in this novel, women learn to act. It is as though, having matured and grown herself, Atwood creates new protagonists who avoid some of the entrapments into which characters in earlier novels fell. Rather than simply renounce their foes, these protagonists band together to defeat them in a way which takes the them further than any previous Atwood protagonist has gone.

If this novel signals a new phase in Atwood's fiction, in which characters no longer must go through a harrowing flight experience, but instead learn to rely on one another to help them safely through dangerous times, then perhaps readers will recognize a paradigmatic shift away from flight and renunciation to

recognition => action => resolution

In other words, the protagonists become creative non-victims as outlined in Atwood's chart in *Survival*, which means they are ex-victims who are no longer tempted by the role of victim.

The topic of victimization is a pertinent one because women continue to find themselves the objects of prejudice or domination at various times in their lives. And since women look to literature

as a road map for guidance (Atwood calls literature not only a mirror, but also a map, a "geography of the mind" in *Survival* [18-19]), it is important for female novelists to supply directions and to explore the ways in which women may find power and personal happiness in their lives. Joseph Campbell asserts that it is possible to reinstitute myth (and therefore meaning) into a demythologized world by finding the storyteller who best strikes the sparks of recognition in each individual reader. Novels, he says, can be "wonderfully instructive" (*The Power of Myth* 4); one reason this is so is that "at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation" (39). In their own ways, then, Pym, Weldon, at Atwood provide the kind of meaning or message that helps a reader finally say, this is my story . . . this is my storyteller.

Women have written about the injustice in their lives since the earliest novels, starting when Jane Austen dramatized the agony of finding a husband in an economically-driven marriage market. In their own ways Pym, Weldon, and Atwood also bring to light the issues and injustices of the modern period at a time when sexual roles and relationships are rapidly changing. An abundance of critical analysis exists on their novels, and the subject of victimization is not new to these novels or to other novelists. But the structural paradigm found in this study reflects in a new way each author's awareness of the recurrences of certain patterns in the female experience and women's potential for reaching self-awareness, for renouncing the forces of victimization, and for achieving some degree of victory in their lives. My purpose is to analyze several novels by each author, two in greater detail than the others, whose theme or structure is pertinent to the scope of this study; to examine the structural pattern each writer uses as she takes her protagonists through their experiences; to identify the precise kinds of victimization the characters experience; and finally

to explore the various ways in which each protagonist sets herself free to the extent that she is able. Furthermore, the conclusion will draw comparisons of the styles, strategies, and narrative patterns of Pym, Weldon, and Atwood as well as to emphasize each author's individual strengths.

To my knowledge no one has studied these three authors together. Like most female writers, they share in common the subject matter of women's search for fulfillment and identity in society and in their personal relationships; however, their differences in strategies, style, and content provide valuable material for cogent comparison and analysis. Despite their differences, these three writers have become mythmakers for modern women, giving them the courage and knowledge to face and act upon the injustice, prejudice, or suffering in their own lives.

CHAPTER II

THE NOVELS OF BARBARA PYM

In her first novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, Barbara Pym introduced the themes and frustrations which would concern her for the remainder of her career. Beginning the novel in 1934 when she was in her early twenties, she used her own love life and experiences as a backdrop for the story. At the time, she was involved with Henry Harvey, but their relationship failed to prove lasting. As she wrote her first novel, she created a persona for herself in Belinda Bede and for Harvey with Archdeacon Henry Hoccleve. In this novel, Belinda lives with her beloved sister Harriet (just as Pym lived with her sister Hilary) in an unnamed, pastoral English village. Both sisters are spinsters of around fifty who are "emotionally starved" (Long 31), partly because they have failed to marry and partly because the men in their lives fail to live up to the idealized view the sisters have of men.

Belinda, the central character, is a lover of romantic fiction and poetry, who has been in unrequited love with Archdeacon Hoccleve for thirty years and still clings to the image of him as a young and impressive man. However, the Archdeacon is now much like the other men of the village--self-centered, pretentious, and helpless. He is married to Agatha, a woman who finds living with him difficult and unrewarding although she enjoys the status of being married to an Archdeacon. The novel explores through the sisters' dinner parties, concerts, and church events the frustrations of being single in a world that places so much emphasis on women's marrying. But the novel hints in a way that Pym would explore in

greater detail in several subsequent novels the disappointments of women who do marry, yet who nevertheless feel unfulfilled. Like all women, Belinda and Harriet desire the emotional satisfaction of loving someone and of being loved in return, but life has simply failed to produce the kind of relationships the sisters had desired and expected. Therefore, each sister clings to her own romantic longings--Belinda for the unattainable Archdeacon and Harriet for the handsome and unattainable curates twenty-five years her junior. Belinda's character, says Mason Cooley, is rooted in *Don Quixote*, in which Belinda as the tall, thin, imaginative, and idealistic Quixote refuses to give up her dream of the Archdeacon. Hoccleve is Belinda's Dulcinea, "an idealized love to which she has been faithful for thirty years" (52).

Belinda's plight, as well as that of the several other spinsters in the novel, is one of self-denial and stoical optimism. Belinda is Pym's first important spinster, a condition which Pym herself feared and therefore explored in great detail throughout her canon. Pym describes Belinda as "dowdy and insignificant, one of the many thousand respectable middle-aged spinsters" (STG 176). Later Belinda confesses that she regrets being "one of many . . . of a great crowd of dreary women" (213-14). Like future Pymian spinsters, she too must grapple with the drawbacks of single life, such as "loneliness, lack of secure companionship, the unfulfilled need to love and to be loved, emotional insecurity, and [the] sense of being neglected and useless" (Lee 30).

Even so, Belinda's awareness of marriage relations in her village leaves her with the impression that even though she is lonely and unappreciated, marriage is not a desirable state either. The couples she observes, especially the Hoccleves, show her that she may be better off by loving Henry from a distance, that marriage to him would force her not only to give up her freedom, but to admit and live with his intolerable qualities, a fact which would break the

romantic tie that binds her to him. As Lee notes, in *Some Tame Gazelle* the "array of weak or ineffectual men cancels out the possibility of any really vital intercourse between Pym's men and women" (33). Therefore, Belinda and her Harriet resign themselves to taking pleasure in their dinner parties and church functions. They reach a point of acceptance in which they look optimistically to each other and their strong faith to provide enough meaning in life. Small pleasures, they discover, yield much contentment. For instance when the sewing woman praises Belinda for keeping a pretty table, "Belinda's eyes filled with tears and she experienced one of those sudden moments of joy that sometimes come to us in the middle of an ordinary day" (52). Or when Belinda listens to Henry read some poems over dinner that he had read to her when they were younger and had dated, she reflects, "Just one evening like that every thirty years or so. It might not seem much to other people, but it was really all one needed to be happy" (158). These statements and other similar ones by Belinda and Harriet reflect the sisters' gentle optimism and love of people and of small pleasures as the mainstays of their existence.

Belinda and Harriet are too generous and too accustomed to self-denial to admit their victimization. Unlike later Pym spinsters who live in larger cities, some of whom lack the support of a close neighborhood and church ties, the Bede sisters at least have a close-knit community. The several women who are single in *Some Tame Gazelle* only vaguely perceive their victimization, but rather see it as simply a feeling of being unappreciated and unfulfilled in romantic relationships. They worry about companionship and a secure living arrangement. They regret that they are unable to complete the age-old cycle of marrying and being a part of a family, of being first in someone's life, and of being accorded stability and status from that relationship.

However, the married women, at least from Belinda's perspective, are not fully completed through marriage either. They must put up with self-important and difficult men. Like Agatha, who has had romantic feelings for Bishop Grote for many years, they too may harbor feelings for another man, yet are unable to find an acceptable outlet for their feelings. Or when women do receive proposals, such as Belinda's from Bishop Grote, a dull man who is looking for a mere helpmeet, they are faced with the problem of a marriage totally devoid of emotional satisfaction. Therefore, their situations present a dilemma. The structure of *Some Tame Gazelle* and several subsequent novels, then, becomes one in which the protagonist(s) recognize the source of their discontent, spend some time thinking about and solving the problem, finally accepting the most realistic solution possible with its shortcomings, disappointments, and small pleasures.

Therefore, one perceives a pattern in Pym's novels in which she worked out the only resolution she found possible for her protagonists: a mature acceptance of whatever life offers. The protagonists move through a stage of recognizing the social and cultural forces which give rise to the prejudice, emotional hurt, or victimization from which they suffer. They spend a great deal of time contemplating their concerns and considering solutions to their problems. Finally, they accept the limitations placed on them and the impossibility of a perfect or story-book resolution and then follow through in the most judicious way possible according to their own preferences and limitations. Most protagonists decide to seek contentment in the simple, but abundant, blessings of life. Visually, the structure of each of Pym's novels in the following discussion conforms to a paradigm which appears as follows:

Recognition => Adjustment => Acceptance

Pym's second novel, *Excellent Women*, is useful for its more in-

depth study of the frustration women feel in finding satisfying love relationships and power in a society which undervalues them. It too underscores the periods of recognition, adjustment, and acceptance which women face in seeking resolution to their problems. Pym published the novel when she was thirty-nine, a time in her life when she knew first-hand the disadvantages and disappointments in a woman's life. In this novel, Pym created her quintessential spinster, who would represent the masses of women who felt disenfranchised, victimized, or simply ignored by society. The novel, which became a Book Society Choice, was serialized in the BBC's Woman's Hour and remains her most popular book to date (VPE 184). It concerns the life of Mildred Lathbury, a post World War II spinster, living in the Pimlico area of the still-ravaged London. Although the novel is not autobiographical in the way *Some Tame Gazelle* was, it nevertheless deals with many of the concerns Pym faced as she looked upon her own life in her late thirties. Though she had hoped to marry, she never found any permanent happiness with a man and lived most of her adult life with her beloved sister. She knew only too well the sacrifices demanded by war, and therefore saw for herself "the excellence of the women of wartime Britain, with their stoicism and humour, their courage in adversity, and above all, their ability to find comfort and pleasure in little things" (Holt *A Lot to Ask* 96). Therefore, the creation of Mildred and the novel's popularity reflect the verisimilitude of the life of an "excellent" woman immediately after the war.

Holt, Pym's foremost biographer, says that most reviewers took the novel as a "perceptive and entertaining comedy" (160). She discusses critics who began to see a darker side to the novel and includes comments by Robert Lidell, who notes that aside from the comedy, the novel is "'almost sad'" and shows "'the Pym woman at the lowest ebb of her experience and expectations'" (Holt 160-61).

And Philip Larkin, Pym's close friend, described the book as "'full of a harsh kind of suffering very far from the others [novels]: it's a study of the pain of being single, the unconscious hurt the world regards as this state's natural clothing . . . time and again one senses not only that Mildred is suffering, but that nobody can see why she shouldn't suffer, like a Victorian cabhorse'" (Holt 161). After Pym gave a copy of the book to another male friend, Richard Roberts, who also found the book witty but sad, she wondered, "'Why it is that *men* find my books so sad? Women don't particularly. Perhaps they (men) have a slight guilt feeling that this is what they do to us, and yet really it isn't as bad as all that'" (Holt 161). Holt says one explanation may be that women's expectations are different from men's, a fact which Pym underscores throughout her canon with sharp irony. Like *Some Tame Gazelle, Excellent Women* is a "triumphant affirmation" of the fact that women are able to overlay their grief with a multitude of trivial tasks that get them through many of life's crises (161).

Yet even though Pym's characters do pull through their crises rather stoically, refusing to see themselves as victims, Pym nevertheless exposes the ways both large and small in which these heroines are abused by society. With their characteristic resilience, they plod through their lives with as much strength as they can muster through choosing their attitudes toward their lives so that by the end of the novels, they have become, as it were, the determiners of their own fates. Their behavioral choices are not always what they would like them to be, but their heroism lies in the fact that they do break through the bonds which bring about their suffering to the degree that they are capable. Given few choices, they at least make the *best* choice possible.

Excellent Women, therefore, is a novel which explores the different ways in which women are victimized in post-war British society. In Mildred, the author creates a charming, but self-

effacing, single woman who, like Belinda Bede, feels totally insignificant in relation to everyone else. Most of her feelings of unimportance and even invisibility derive from the fact that she too is a spinster, and therefore unrecognized and invalidated by society. Even though she is an excellent woman of good works, who is respected by everyone in her intimate circle, she nevertheless suffers the stigma of being unmarried. She is constantly confronted with the brutal truth of her condition as well as by men's favored position in the social hierarchy and their indifference to women like her.

The first line of the novel sets the tone for the kind of condescension Mildred endures throughout the novel by the patronizing attitude of men. Not only are spinsters treated with especial disregard in the story, but often women in general come under a seemingly good-natured assault. Mr. Mallett, the churchwarden who is passing by on foot, opens with, "'Ah, you ladies! Always on the spot when there's something happening!" (EW 5). So familiar is this general sense of disapproval that Mildred feels guilty "as if I had no right to be discovered outside my own front door" (5). The occasion is that new neighbors are moving into the flat just below her and a moving van has just arrived with the furniture. Mildred, who tells her story in first person, opens with a sense of annoyance over Mr. Mallett's observation and her own speculation that "I suppose an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business" (5). She knows that spinsters are thought to be more inquisitive than married women "because of the emptiness of their lives" (8). She even laments having to share a bathroom with her new neighbors, "as if I personally had been found unworthy of a bathroom of my own" (6).

Several other factors contribute to Mildred's feeling of being

undervalued. For one thing, her parents are both dead and she has no other family members. She lives in a rather shabby part of London on a small income from her father, who was a clergyman. Mildred's job also contributes to her feeling of worthlessness, for she works at an agency that assists impoverished gentlewomen. This job is not particularly valuable or important because it involves helping weaker members of society and because it is only part-time. Her work there is very close to Mildred's heart because she feels she is "just the kind of person" who might one day become an impoverished gentlewoman herself (12).

In addition, Mildred describes herself as "mousy and rather plain," admonishing her readers not to compare her to Jane Eyre, "who must have given hope to so many plain women who tell their stories in the first person" (7). As narrator, Mildred constantly downplays her talents, only occasionally acknowledging her true value, such as when she admits that her parochial experience as a clergyman's daughter makes her "capable of dealing with most of the stock situations or even the great moments of life--birth, marriage, death, the successful jumble sale, the garden fete spoilt by bad weather . . . ." (6). Through dramatic irony, Pym presents the reader with a clearer view of Mildred's worth than the overly-modest protagonist herself is willing to give.

Even though she comes to be admired and respected by the men who know her, they nevertheless unconsciously perpetuate her lack of belief in her own importance. The first such character is Rocky Napier, the neighbor who has just moved in, along with his anthropologist wife, the outwardly lovely Helena, who is careless and inept at domestic duties. Rocky is a "dark and elegant" (30) former lieutenant who has just left the military, where he lived in a luxurious villa in Italy and served as social director for an admiral. Part of his job involved being "'charming to a lot of dreary Wren officers in ill-fitting white uniforms'" (9). His engaging manner and

ingrained attentiveness to women easily catch the notice of Mildred, who is unused to being flattered by men. Because of Rocky's good looks and attention, Mildred becomes more conscious of her clothing and general appearance from the moment he moves in. When Rocky stops in uninvited one day, she apologizes for her appearance, at once feeling "stupid" and "fussy", "As if anyone would care how I looked or even notice me" (34). On the one hand, she is aware of her own dowdiness compared to Helena's beauty and fashionable style; on the other hand, like the numerous Wren officers before her, she feels the influence of Rocky's considerable charm and attention. Although she is aware of his "frivolous attitude" (34), she cannot help liking him.

These new neighbors make her more aware of her feeling of inferiority and unmarried status. She begins to emphasize her "spinsterish" qualities in her mind. For instance, when explaining how she enjoys living alone after her former roommate Dora Caldicote has moved out, she says she is now "old enough to become fussy and spinsterish" (12). Another time, she is irritated at being awakened by the Napiers at one in the morning and feels that she is "getting spinsterish and 'set'" in her ways (20). On another occasion, as Mildred turns on the radio, she hears a program about women who all sounded "so married and splendid, their lives so full and yet so well organised, that I felt more than usually spinsterish and useless" (28). Whenever Mildred uses the word, it has a negative and gloomy connotation, and serves to emphasize her isolation from other women and from society in general. As Margaret Bradham states, "In the Pym world marriage forms the basis of the social scale, with married women at top and spinsters at the bottom. . . They equate marriage with a full life and spinsterhood with an empty life" (32). Like Belinda, who worries over her fate should her sister marry, Mildred reflects that an unmarried woman with no ties

"could very well become unwanted" (39).

The Napiers have a shallow opinion of unmarried women based on the assumption that these women are dim and unworldly. When Helena confides to Mildred that she and Rocky are having a few marital problems and Mildred attempts to console her, Helena chides, "'Of course you've never been married,'" putting Mildred in her place "among the rows of excellent women" (27). Pym constantly develops the idea of excellent women as those spinsters who are capable church workers and good listeners, always cooperative and self-effacing. In other words, they are expected to immerse themselves in service to others, and in doing so they unconsciously participate in a hegemony that devalues them as they inflate the value of others. As Carol Whitney notes, the surplus women in British society are "metamorphosed into excellent women, the identity assigned to English spinsters since the Victorian age" (72). She refers to Margaret Ezell, who reiterated that the role of a spinster in a married society was "'to relieve the married women of their community burdens, to become essentially the servant of the community at large'" (455). When Mildred finds herself being used by her friends, she realizes that "practically anything may be the business of an unattached woman with no troubles of her own, who takes a kindly interest in those of her friends" (47). Yet in spite of the demands placed on them, Bradham finds that Pym's spinsters "are searching for the same things as Pym's married women: love and happiness" (32). Ezell asserts that the subject matter of Pym's early novels, particularly her treatment of the "woman question" links Pym to the social protest novels of Charlotte Bronte (450).

Other excellent, but unattached, women inhabit the pages of the novel, women who feel they exist only on the fringes of society. When Mildred's spinsterish schoolteacher-friend Dora comes for a visit, she notices the changes in Mildred's physical appearance. Mildred is using a little more make-up, her hair is more carefully

arranged, and her clothes are less drab. Rather than compliment her, she makes Mildred feel foolish over "'smartening'" herself up (105). Dora's noticing the extra care in clothing and make-up forces Mildred to admit to herself that "the Napiers had made this difference" (100). It seems that Rocky has awakened in Mildred her latent desire to be pretty and desirable and to break out of her gloomy mold of respectability and decorum.

As the two spinsters begin to catch up on each other's news, the subject of men and marriage naturally comes up. In mocking Mildred's appearance, Dora remarks, "'There's not much you can do when you're over thirty . . . .You get too set in your ways, really. Besides, marriage isn't everything'" (101). Mildred admits to Dora there is nobody she wants to marry, to which Dora responds, "'I don't know anyone either, at the moment'" (101). As they the lapse into a comfortable silence, Mildred reflects sadly that this type of conversation is "a kind of fiction that we had always kept up, this not knowing anyone at the moment that we wanted to marry, as if there had been in the past and would be in the future" (101).

Unlike Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle*, who has given up on marrying and is content instead to live in unrequited and untested love with the Archdeacon, Mildred's reflection reveals the sense of pride and continued hope of countless women to someday find men who want to marry them. They find it too unpleasant to face the grim image of themselves as permanent spinsters who have no hope for a more fulfilling life. Mildred is forced to admit during this moment, however, that her life will most likely consist of "the small unpleasantnesses rather than the great tragedies; the little useless longings rather than the great renunciations and dramatic love affairs of history or fiction" (101). She realizes that even though she may not marry, she will be able to stoically endure the unpleasantness of the fact. In fact, so sure is Mildred of her future prospects that she has a moment in which she imagines herself and

Dora in twenty or thirty years' time, "perhaps living together, bickering about silly trifles. It was a depressing picture" (105).

Their sense of feeling left out of the throng of life persists when Mildred and Dora attend a dedication at their old school. They arrive at the service where they meet many of their old school chums. As the two look on at the ceremony and at their past acquaintances, Mildred remembers the feeling that she had had at school of "expecting something that never came" (111). As the two friends prepare to leave, they become pensive and quiet. Mildred notes,

> We no longer belittled our successful contemporaries or rejoiced over our unsuccessful ones. For after all, what had *we* done? We had not made particularly brilliant careers for ourselves, and most important of all, we had neither of us married. That was really it. It was the ring on the left hand that people at the Old Girls' Reunion looked for. (112)

And even though Mildred admits the ring in fact was often an uninteresting one, "the plain gold band or the very smallest and dimmest of diamonds" (112), and the husbands "also of this variety" (112), she nevertheless is acutely aware that in society's eyes and in her own, the absence of a ring indicates a failure.

Mildred is even further depressed when she and Dora catch the train away from the service and meet a woman who knew Rocky Napier. She tells the two friends of her knowledge about the charming lieutenant:

> "People used to fall in love with him but it only lasted about a month or two, usually. After that one saw what a shallow kind of person he really was. He used to take people up for a week or two and then drop them. We Wren officers used to call ourselves the Playthings - sometimes we were taken off our shelf and dusted and looked at, but then we were always put back again." (114)

Dora is struck by how easily some men use women and then abandon them, as if they have no feelings or value. When she listens to the former officer's story, she remarks, "'We've had a lucky escape, if you ask me'" (114), but all Mildred can think is, "A lucky escape? . . . But would we have escaped any of us, if we had been given the opportunity to do otherwise?" (114-15). She finally responds to Dora, "'Perhaps it's better to be unhappy than not to feel anything at all'" (115). The Old Girls' Reunion has served to emphasize in Mildred's mind the bleakness of being unmarried and of having romantic fantasies all the same. However, she determines to be on her guard around Rocky and to stop herself "from thinking too well of him" (116). It is obvious from Mildred's feelings about Rocky that he is exciting and charming to her. And although he provides the kind of romantic interest that Pym's women miss, he too fails to exhibit any true concern for a woman's feeling or value. Therefore, he serves to point up Pym's belief that even the kind of men who attract and appeal to women are shallow and selfish, men like Rocky and Archdeacon Hoccleve.

About this time, the Napiers decide to separate. Rocky is fed up with his wife's career and her lack of interest in domestic duties. He complains to Mildred of Helena's lack of consideration by leaving the washing-up for days until the cleaning lady comes. It never occurs to Mildred to ask Rocky why he does not do the dishes himself, for it is assumed that washing is the job of women, even though Helena is at this point in the novel more involved in her career than is her husband in his. Rocky's move to the cottage in the country forces Mildred to admit that she misses him. She is aware that he regards her as nothing more than an accommodating friend and sympathetic listener. When she thinks about Rocky, she wonders if the Wren officers he had known had had "their dreams too?" (171). "Had they imagined Rocky wifeless and turning to them for comfort or had they always known they were just playthings, taken down

from their shelves only when he wanted an evening's diversion? I could not flatter myself that I had done even that for him" (171). She feels sad when she thinks of the lines

> *Better by far you should forget and smile,*
> *Than that you should remember and be sad . . . .* (171)

Concerning Rocky, she knows "It would simply not occur to him to be sad" over their relationship (171).

Even though Mildred agrees to help Helena get back together with Rocky and projects her "rather noble part, stepping into the background when they were reunited and going quietly away to make a cup of tea or do some washing or ironing" (185), she must counterbalance her feelings for Rocky against the more sensible solution of helping the couple get back together. In one of her many recognition scenes in the novel, she concedes,

> And yet, what had I really hoped for? Dull, solid friendship without charm? No, there was enough of that between women and women and even between men and women. Of course, if he had not been married. . . but this suggested a situation altogether too unreal to contemplate. In the first place, I should probably never have met him at all, and I should certainly not have enjoyed the privilege of preparing lunch for him on the day his wife left him or of making all those cups of tea on 'occasions'. (226)

With these thoughts in mind Mildred has less trouble saying her final goodbye to Rocky and Helena once they have reconciled.

Mildred finds herself wondering about marriage, and what happens after a couple part and then come back together: "It is said that people are refined and ennobled by suffering and one knows that they sometimes are, but would Helena have learned to be neater in the kitchen, or Rocky to share her interest in matrilineal kin-groups?" (238). Mildred finds herself incapable of looking into their

future. With this realization of the inconclusive nature and rewards of marriage, Mildred begins to close this chapter of her life and to look more closely at the other two important male figures in her life, those of Julian Malory, the parish priest, and Everard Bone, the archaeologist friend of Helena. These men will never play with Mildred's emotions the way Rocky Napier has, but each in his own way makes Mildred aware of the station of women and how little emotional closeness one may expect in a relationship with him. Their traditional attitudes toward women only serve to reinforce the feelings of frustration Mildred and women like her feel.

Julian is the forty-year old vicar of St. Mary's. Even though Mildred's relationship with him is cordial, she nevertheless finds him "rather forbidding," and notes that "women did not tend to fuss over him as they might otherwise have done" (14). She doubts that anyone had ever knitted him a scarf or pullover. Julian expects the company and good works of Mildred, and enjoys his position of authority as parish priest. Even though the subject is never discussed openly, many parishioners hope that Mildred and Julian will someday marry because she seems well-suited for the work. As Winifred admits, she is the kind of virtuous woman the parishoners would like to see Julian marry, but to Mildred, who tires of the mantle of respect constantly being thrust upon her, "Virtue is an excellent thing and we should all strive after it, but it can sometimes be a little depressing" (44). What the church members fail to realize is that the two have no attraction for each other so that no matter how practical and right it seems, nothing develops between them. Instead, Mildred must endure the embarrassment she feels when Julian takes an interest in a newcomer, Allegra Gray, the attractive widow of a clergyman.

Allegra helps to illustrate a point Pym wants to make, that men sometimes make fools of themselves over pretty women when more suitable women are right under their noses. She is also important as

an illustration of the terrible desperation some women feel at being single and unattached and the base tactics they will use to capture a man in marriage. In her plight to secure a future for herself, Allegra becomes a thoughtless victimizer of others. She is one of the many unmarried women in England in post-war England when marriageable men are scarce, and she takes to husband-hunting as a skater takes to ice. Although she is able to easily catch the attention of men because of her good looks and style, she seems to care nothing for them personally. Her need to get married is driven by the harsh economics of the period and her intent to avoid the trap of being a social outcast by remaining unmarried. When Mildred learns that Mrs. Gray is going to rent the extra rooms in Julian's and Winifred's house, she becomes suspicious immediately, explaining that there seem to be two types of widows, "one of which may be dangerous" (45). Mildred takes a dislike to Allegra, noting her good looks and the fact that she is "rather *too* nicely dressed" (57). Mrs. Gray's quiet manner and self-sufficiency and the "secret" quality of her smile suggest to Mildred Allegra's dubious motive (57).

When the young widow moves into the Malorys, she takes advantage of Mildred's presence one day to help her hem curtains, assuming that a dowdy person like Mildred has nothing better to do and would like to be of service to a more attractive and viable person like herself. Whereas Allegra falsely assumes she can use Mildred in the way others do, Mildred too exhibits her own forms of prejudice toward the widow. The fact that Mildred mistrusts her because of her looks and charm shows that both women react to each other based on personal prejudices. Rather than sharing their common ground, they fail to make any personal connections.

Allegra's unscrupulous ability to victimize becomes clear when she reveals her plans to marry Julian, then suggests that perhaps Winifred can come live with Mildred after the marriage. The status

of women like Winifred and Mildred is so low that Allegra callously assumes she can push Winifred on Mildred. The scene also points out the sheer desperation of some women to avoid the trap of being single. The possibility that she herself may not find a husband, and will thus become reduced to the status of Winifred or Mildred, is so distasteful to Allegra that she will selfishly use anyone in order to complete her plans. Like many others, Allegra appeals to that part of Mildred that is trained to devalue herself and place the needs of others before her own. But for once, Mildred asserts herself and declines the offer. In despair, Allegra exclaims, "'What do women *do* if they don't marry'" (129).

Julian's treatment of Mildred after the news of his engagement illustrates the arrogance of male characters in Pym's fiction, even those, such as clergymen, who are supposed to be sensitive and socially astute. In Julian's pride and sense of importance, he has also assumed that Mildred has had hopes of becoming Mrs. Malory. Therefore, he condescends to Mildred in an attempt to soothe her, "'Ah, Mildred, you understand. Dear Mildred, it would have been a fine thing if it could have been. . . . Still it must have been a shock, a blow almost, I might say'" (133), laboring on heavily and humorlessly, until Mildred wonders, "Did love always make men like this?" (133). Later she must endure all the "Poor Mildred"'s and silent stares from the parishioners.

Everyone knows Mildred would make a more suitable wife, but Allegra's good looks and determination prove more potent than Mildred's good works and good character in attracting and catching a man. Mildred realizes, however, that "It was not the excellent women who got married but people like Allegra Gray, who was no good at sewing, and Helena Napier, who left all the washing up" (170). However, she feels too old to change and feels depressed at being regarded in the parish as the "chief of the rejected ones," a position she must fill with "as much dignity as I could" (170).

The whole affair causes Mildred to realize the superiority of women in understanding the human heart and in handling crises. A short time later, Julian's sister arrives at Mildred's house hysterical because Allegra has told her she needs to move into a religious community once she and Julian marry. Winifred is to suffer the humiliation and desperation of being kicked out of her home to make a place for the future bride. Like Belinda before her in *Some Tame Gazelle*, being a single woman leaves her in the precarious position of possibly losing her living arrangement. Mildred cannot believe Julian has not seen through Allegra's scheming, lamenting, "'Yes, men are sometimes taken in. They don't ever quite see the terrible depths that we do'" (207). Time and again in Pym's fiction, the author points up the superior knowledge and perception of the women while the men appear as lackluster and weak. Finally, Mildred admits she is simply "exhausted with bearing other people's burdens" (208). When Julian and Mildred discuss the matter, he insists, "'I obviously had no idea of her true character. You see, I thought her such a fine person'" (211). But Mildred refuses "to add to the burden of his humiliation by pointing out that he may have been taken in, like so many men before him, by a pretty face" (211).

At this point in the novel, Mildred has been courted to some degree by two men, or at least has had some possibility for getting involved with both Rocky, who it appears will be single when he and Helena split up, and with Julian, once his engagement falls through. But both of these men had shown a preference for pretty and vivacious women. Such shallowness is only too familiar and demeaning to excellent women like Mildred, who are constantly confronted with the fact of their dowdiness and their low esteem in society. Even though they retain hope that they will someday marry, they know the odds that they will not do so are great. Some, like Dora and Winifred, have no prospects whatsoever and seem to lack

even male friendships in their lives.

At least Mildred is capable of maintaining several male friendships in the novel. In addition to becoming involved in the lives of Rocky and Julian, Mildred also retains a friendship with Dora's brother William, who had once shown an interest in Mildred, but nothing had come of that when Mildred realized that William was not a marrying man. What remains is an annual luncheon date and a relationship that "had settled down into a comfortable dull thing" (66). Mildred looks forward to their lunches because William is finicky about food and wine, and she can therefore expect a good meal. William works in the Ministry somewhere and is now "a rather grey-looking man in the late thirties" (66).

William's role in the novel is important as well as entertaining, for although he relates to the action of the novel only tangentially, he nevertheless illustrates in his amusing way why it is that women like Mildred are prohibited (in his eyes) from marrying. And through William, Pym sketches the kind of "grey" and lifeless character that single women find everywhere in society, men who are eligible for marriage but who are boring to and inferior to women. Mildred attends her luncheon with William at the restaurant of his choosing and drinks the wine of his choice. Since this meeting occurs about halfway through the novel when Mildred is enamored with Rocky, she is perkier than usual, arousing suspicion in William. Mildred goes on to describe the turbulent marriage of the Napiers to William, insisting that Rocky is much too nice for Helena. She admits that Rocky is just the kind of person she would have liked for herself. This admission is startling to William, who admonishes her, "'But my dear Mildred, *you* mustn't marry . . . Life is disturbing enough as it is without these alarming suggestions. I always think of you as being so very balanced and sensible, such an excellent woman. I do hope you're *not* thinking of getting married'" (69). When Mildred admits she has no one in mind, William is relieved because he sees

himself and Mildred as "'the observers of life'" (70).

A visit to William's office at the Ministry reveals Pym's ironical view of the seemingly prestigious positions of the Civil Service men. There Mildred observes "Grey-looking men like William" (72), who have names like Calverley-Hibbert and Radcliffe-Forde. These men sit in desks with card-indexes in front of them, wire baskets, and importantly-labelled stacks of files. It is impossible for Mildred to tell what, if anything, these grey men do. As she looks about the Ministry, she describes the "grey men" six different times, suggesting their lifelessness, sameness, and stodginess. Mildred hears the rattling sound of a cart when suddenly the men grab their mugs and hurry to get their tea. Even William rushes outside his office, but does not offer to get Mildred any. Once everyone is settled and Mildred can see the men through open office doors, she observes grey men sitting at their desks:

> . . . their hands moving among files; some sipped tea, one read a newspaper, another manipulated a typewriter with the uncertain touch of two fingers. A girl leaned from a window, another combed her hair, a third typed with expert speed. A young man embraced a girl in a rough playful way and she pulled his hair while the other occupants of the room looked on encouragingly. (73)

This scene is enormously humorous because in it Pym contrasts the self-importance of the men with their double-sets of telephones on their desks and important-looking stacks of files with their ineptitude and their lack of enterprise. Like mice in a behavioristic laboratory experiment, they play at their jobs until the tea cart comes, then run salivating for their reinforcements. Even more, William confides to Mildred that he does not like his new office because, "'Different pigeons come to the windows'" (71). The reader is left with the comic image of the British Civil Service scene and its civil servants in all their blown-up pompousness and petty

vanity.

A final male character is important in the discussion of the victimization of Mildred and women like her, and this man might be described as another "grey" man like most others in the novel. Yet he is especially important because at the end of the story, there is a hint that he and Mildred will marry. The man is the anthropologist Everard Bone, whom Mildred meets through Helena Napier. Even though Helena is married to Rocky, she is in love with the staid, but aloof and unattainable, Everard. Mildred sees him on the stairs when Helena first moves in downstairs and decides she does not like him at all. One critic calls Everard an illustration of "the diminished social landscape" of England (Long 56). His name, his pointed nose and his "air of priggishness" (EW 26) turn Mildred against him immediately. Yet she is thrust into his company several times through the Napiers. The first time she actually meets him, they have a discussion about anthropology. When Mildred attempts to start up a conversation with him by saying it must be "fun" going to Africa and working there, Everard replies that "'Fun' is hardly the word'" (35). Like other men in the novel he inflates the importance of his work, responding, "'It's very hard work, learning an impossibly difficult language, then endless questionings and statistics, writing up notes and all the rest of it'" (35). Interestingly, however, he wonders a few moments later whether it might be "'a waste of time'" (35). The two have a rather unpleasant conversation, but Mildred nevertheless agrees to attend a meeting at the Learned Society to hear the paper given by Everard and Helena. Even Everard admonishes Mildred that "'you will find it deadly dull . . . .You mustn't expect too much'" (37). In her characteristic sardonic style, Mildred notes that "women like me really expected very little - nothing, almost" (37).

This scene emphasizes the fact that a lifetime of conditioning

has trained Mildred to expect little from men. She is used to listening attentively to men as they tout their authority, all the while deferentially attempting to sound impressed since that is what is expected of her. She must feign an interest in anthropology because society places so much value on the work of men. The fact of the matter is that Pym herself was not "at all" interested in anthropology, but found that the subject provided measureless grounds for "invention and imagination" (Holt *A Lot to Ask* 176). She had worked at the International African Institute as Assistant Editor in London beginning in 1946 and was constantly amused at the detachment of the anthropologists when describing the "'ridiculous, impossible, or disgusting features'" of their work (169). In her own detached and comic perspective, Pym often returned to the subject of anthropologists in her fiction, pointing up their detail in observing primitive people while failing to see clearly their own eccentricities.

Even though Everard is priggish and lackluster in personality, his looks and bearing attract attention. When Mildred sees him in church one day, she notes his tall figure, his well-cut overcoat, his long nose and his fair hair. He looks "outstanding in this gathering of mediocrity" (50), while she blends in with the plain and indistinguishable women in their neutral winter coats and simple hats. Indeed, when Everard gets up to leave, he looks back at her but does not recognize her. But even though Mildred cannot help but admit he is "perhaps just a little splendid" (65), she sees him as a forbidding and unromantic person. When the preacher delivers a sermon entreating his flock to knit themselves together as the early Christians had done, Mildred cannot help but think that she would prefer "not to have all things in common with Everard Bone" (51). Her next thought, that he keeps showing up in her life "as if he was to be in some way my Lenten penance" (51), turns out to be a perceptive and prophetic one.

The meeting of the Learned Society is another comic scene in the novel in the way it portrays the men of anthropology as little more than pumped-up children who expect their women to attend their monotonous functions and provide their just praise and tasty desserts afterwards. Rocky stations himself and Mildred close to the food because "'these types are little better than primitive peoples when it comes to eating'" (87). An elderly man close by responds that the anthropologists are even worse. At least the primitive peoples "have an elaborate order and precedence in eating but I'm afraid that when we get started it's every man for himself'" (87). He ends by saying he hopes the men remember their manners sufficiently to offer refreshment to the ladies first. At that moment tea is brought by Miss Clovis and the old man quickly helps himself to tea, collects an assortment of sandwiches and cakes on a plate and retires to the opposite corner of the room. Rocky and Mildred watch the other men in the room rushing toward the refreshments. Then as Mildred settles down to listen to Helena deliver her paper, she notices an old lady with her knitting who falls asleep with her head drooped forward on her breast. The fact that someone else has no ability or inclination to follow the proceeding gives Mildred comfort. The woman, Mildred later learns, is the wife of the President of the Learned Society. When it is Everard's turn to deliver, he speaks "exceptionally well" without consulting his notes often (92). But his personality lacks "warmth or charm" (92).

Even though Mildred offers Everard no encouragement and even though the two have a difficult time at conversation and do not feel a sexual attraction toward each other, he continues to haunt her, turning up unexpectedly from time to time and offering to take her to lunch. It maddens Mildred because he never has the courtesy to call and on occasion catches her when she feels too frowzy to go out. On another occasion, Everard invites Mildred to have dinner with his

mother. When she objects because of her dumpy appearance and tells him she would have liked a proper invitation, he responds, "'You seem to be very nicely dressed,'" without looking at her (146). Everard constantly ignores Mildred by refusing to show any interest in her personally or physically. Since he obviously has paid no real attention to her, Mildred knows he has selfish motives for pursuing her.

The dinner is extremely difficult for Mildred because Mrs. Bone is eccentric and engages her in bizarre conversation about woodworm in furniture and other strange topics. The dialogue goes back and forth without any intervention by Everard, who is observing Mildred throughout this display. When Mildred sees that Everard is not going to turn the talk into normal channels, she realizes that she "had been bearing the full burden of the evening" (150) and excuses herself. After leaving, he compliments her for being able to carry on a conversation with his mother, commenting that no one else has been capable of doing so. It occurs to Mildred that one of the purposes of the evening has been to see whether Mildred can hold up to the trying discussions with Mrs. Bone. Later, one may speculate, Everard will use Mildred as a buffer between himself and his mother.

On another occasion Everard and Mildred have a lunch that gets off to a poor start. Mildred still finds him irritating and too dry. But one critic believes Mildred is missing the point with Everard because his expressions of interest are "oblique and ambiguous" (Cooley 89). The fact that he would like to make her into a typist, proofreader, and indexer is "humiliatingly clear" (89). Yet he does some of the things suitors are supposed to do, but in a fumbling way. During their conversation they get onto the subject of marriage, in which Everard tells her he would like to marry a sensible sort of person. "'Somebody who would help you in your work?'", she suggests, "'Somebody with a knowledge of anthropology who could correct proofs and make an index?'" (189). Then Mildred brings up

Ester Clovis, the tireless secretary to the anthropologists. Their conversation is worth repeating because it clarifies the position each takes on excellent women:

> "Ester Clovis is certainly a very capable person," he said doubtfully. "An excellent woman altogether."
>
> "You could consider marrying an excellent woman?" I asked in amazement. "But they are not for marrying."
>
> "You're surely not suggesting that they are for the other things?" he said, smiling.
>
> That had certainly not occurred to me and I was annoyed to find myself embarrassed.
>
> "They are for being unmarried," I said, "and by that I mean a positive rather than a negative state."
>
> "Poor things, aren't they allowed to have the normal feelings, then?"
>
> "Oh, yes, but nothing can be done about them."
>
> "Of course I do respect and esteem Esther Clovis," Everard went on.
>
> "Oh, respect and esteem - such dry bones!" (190)

Mildred knows that she is considered an excellent woman also, and she is tired of having the mantle of respect and virtue constantly forced upon her. She detests the image of always being practical and sensible, yet if she fails to live up to these dreary expectations, she will be castigated by society. What Mildred and the other women want besides respect and esteem is romance and love. This is why Mildred and the Wren officers are attracted to Rocky. In his self-assurance and attention to women, he makes them feel alive and aware of their femininity. When she and Everard part after their lunch, therefore, Mildred thanks him but does not offer to send him a postcard from her upcoming holiday because, unlike William Caldicote, he was "not the kind of person one sent postcards to"

(193).

Finally, Everard resorts to standard protocol and phones Mildred for a date. His invitation includes an evening at his flat and the statement, "'I have got some meat to cook'" (218). Mildred can see herself "putting a small joint into the oven and preparing the vegetables" as she bends over the sink (218). She declines the invitation because she cannot stand the thought of being used by Everard. When she discovers he will have to rely on a cook book, she feels guilty at the thought that he must prepare his meat by himself. However, she chides herself that "Men are not nearly so helpless and pathetic as we sometimes like to imagine them, and on the whole they run their lives better than we do ours" (220). Next she worries that she may not have been the first woman Everard invited to dinner, and the thought disturbs her because "no doubt somebody else would be only too glad to" (220). The constant threat to her and women like her is that if she refuses a man anything, he will easily find it elsewhere. Once again, Mildred is aware of a missed opportunity, the chance of being with a man. Therefore, the next time Everard phones for dinner, she accepts.

For the next occasion, Mildred buys a new dress and changes her hair style, hoping to give herself a new look. However, what she achieves instead is the exact look of "the kind of person who would be able to correct proofs or make up an index" (248). Her feelings of inadequacy are reinforced when she accidentally runs into William Caldicote, who lives near Everard, and asks him if he thinks her new look is an improvement. He responds, "'An improvement? Ah, well, I should hardly presume to express that kind of an opinion. You mean an improvement on the way you usually look? But how do you usually look? One scarcely remembers'" (251).

When Mildred arrives, Everard's first words are, "'Oh, there you are'" (252), rather than some pleasant words of greeting a woman might prefer to hear upon arrival. He makes no notice of Mildred's

clothes or hair. The conversation is not inspiring, but it will do, Mildred feels. The dinner turns out well, and the atmosphere between them turns "pleasant and cosy" (254) until Everard begins worrying about how he is going to find time to check the proofs and make the index for his book. When Mildred asks if there are not people who do such things, he says, "'You mean excellent women whom one respects and esteems?'" (254). Still Mildred does not volunteer, protesting that she does not know how. He eagerly promises to teach her, becoming more enthusiastic than she has ever seen him.

Mildred's recognition of future reality comes as she thinks about this proposition, realizing that "before long I should be certain to find myself at his sink peeling potatoes and washing up; that would be a nice change when both proofreading and indexing began to pall" (255). She asks herself, "Was any man worth this burden? Probably not, but one shouldered it bravely and cheerfully and in the end it might turn out to be not so heavy after all" (255). For a moment this vision, coupled with imaginings of future conversation with Mrs. Bone about worms and birds is too morbid to bear, and Mildred cries out, "'How can I ever know what it really means?'" (255). Everard tells her never to mind, reminding her of the President's wife, who had fallen asleep with her knitting at the meeting of the Learned Society. This is to be Mildred's fate then--drifting off to sleep at dreary anthropology meetings.

Bleak as it may seem to some, this reflection reveals that Mildred has been through the recognition and adjustment phase represented in Pym's structural paradigm, has accepted her fate, and intends to make the most of it. The last paragraph of the novel shows that Mildred feels she has made the best choice possible. She pictures her life in the future with her "duty" of protecting Julian Malory from all the women in his house and her "work" for Everard

(256). With this thought, she says, "it seems as if I might be going to have what Helena called 'a full life' after all" (256). Mildred has other choices, of course, but she finds them inferior to the one she has just made. She can attempt to marry Julian, since all the women in the church would press that decision upon the hapless vicar, or she can remain an excellent woman, having her annual lunch with William Caldicote and helping out wherever she is needed, when the Napiers and the Winifreds of her world come to her for comfort and tea. Or she can marry Everard Bone and spend her life washing up and cooking his meat, reading his proofs, and making his index.

It may be tempting for some critics to declare Mildred's choice a failure and to emphasize the negative qualities of the outcome, or to assume that she is merely trading one form of victimization (spinsterhood) for another (marriage to Everard). Robert Long, for instance, feels, "Rather than the heroine's finding love, bounty, and happiness in marriage, Pym's ending implies that Mildred's marriage will merely be a continuation of her helplessness" (57). Her decision involves a trade-off, obviously. In return for her clerical and domestic help, she will get a faithful and dependable man, one without much humor and certainly no romance, perhaps not even love. But she will garner the respect of society by being a married woman. She will have someone there with her as she grows old. She will feel needed. When she weighs her choices, she makes the best decision for herself.

Long feels Mildred's marriage to Everard will involve "the suppression of her personality" and sees the ending as a commentary by Pym on herself (55). Rossen supports this idea with the statement that Pym's plots "focus on the aspect of renunciation of passion and romance through moral strength of will" ("On Not Being Jane Eyre" 138). True, Everard Bone is no Rocky Napier with his charm and ability to evoke the romantic longings of a woman. But neither will he toss Mildred aside as though she were an expendable

"plaything."

It is necessary then to re-emphasize Pym's statement that the situation with her men, "'really isn't as bad as all that'" (Holt *A Lot to Ask 161*). Pym was a realist who wrote what she saw and experienced in her own life. One thing her novels dramatize again and again is that the reality of women's lives never lives up to their fantasies. This awareness of irony is why Brothers believes Pym delivers the message in her canon that "fiction should cease portraying an idealised version of love" (69). Pym makes it clear that until women give up their "naivety and romantic susceptibilities" (Brothers 71), they will feel cheated and betrayed. Female characters must come to a more realistic view of love and marriage and in the process may have to accept something less than the ideal. To do so does not doom Pymian women to lifetimes of gloom and bitterness. Even with the evaporation of their fantasies, Pym's women remain resilient, resourceful, and fairly cheerful.

They break out of their victimization by recognizing the realities and limitations of life and by finding comfortable spheres in which they stay busy and involved within their circle of friends. Quietly aware of their many superiorities, they remain masters at making do (Kapp 238). As Kapp says, in the life of a Pym character, "there is more to be salvaged in any predicament than we suspect" (240). Mildred herself predicts that she will live a "full life" after all (256), and she should be taken at her word.

Just one year after completing *Excellent Women*, Pym published *Jane and Prudence* (1953), about the friendship and lives of two women whose names comprise the title. The novel is important in the way it displays Pym's continued interest in the irony which her protagonists feel concerning love relationships and marriage. Pym enlarged her scope in her third novel by including the disappointing

situation of a married woman also as the author continued to broaden her personal views about the ironic conditions in which most women find themselves. By combining the stories of a single woman and a married woman, Pym was able to articulate in a deeper and more comprehensive way the plight of the women she observed in her world. The novel once again illustrates Pym's structural paradigm of recognition => adjustment => acceptance for the married protagonist Jane, but shows the emptiness felt by Prudence when she refuses to reach a mature acceptance about herself and the realities of life. Prudence is victimized because she believes a man will come along some day and make her life complete. The false expectations derived from a childhood that conditions a woman to look to a man for happiness and fulfillment only serve to alienate and disappoint both Prudence and Jane.

One portion of this novel explores the plight Prudence, who has a humdrum job at a cultural institute despite the fact that she had studied literature under Jane Cleveland, the other woman of the title, at Oxford. Prudence is different from Mildred in *Excellent Women* because she has a string of unsatisfactory love affairs, and remains single at the end of the novel while still hoping to find happiness with the right man. The other portion of the novel covers Jane, who has married a rural and unworldly vicar and feels disillusioned in her role as clergyman's wife. Jane had dreamed of being the perfect clerical wife, similar to those she had read of in Victorian novels, yet somehow she feels "no good at parish work" (102), indifferent to domestic work, and tactless and loud at Parochial Council meetings. Marriage has failed to live up to her expectations, and over time, "The passion of those early days . . . faded away into mild, kindly looks and spectacles. There came a day when one didn't quote poetry to one's husband any more" (48). The fact that Jane's husband has no particular flaws, except perhaps a loss of passion, emphasizes Pym's belief that at the end of love and

marriage is inescapable disillusionment. Even though Pym points out the particular loneliness and problems of being single in *Excellent Women*, she observed that married women seemed little better off because marriage brings the end to passion and romantic love. Even the dynamic couple, Rocky and Helena, are unable to maintain their early passion long into their marriage. Wilmet and Rowena review their fate in *A Glass of Blessings*, noting that Helena had had to give up her career, move to the country, and bear Rocky a child in order to hold her marriage together. In *Less Than Angels*, Esther Clovis reviews the fate of Everard and Mildred, remarking that "'Everard had married a rather dull woman who was nevertheless a great help to him in his work'" (LA 64).

Pym uses the radically different protagonists, Prudence and Jane, to illustrate how both in their disparate experiences feel disappointed with the way things turn out in their lives as well as to show how a mature acceptance of one's choices and situation finally leads one to become happier and more contented. While Jane tries to overcome her sense of failure by studying "obscure seventeenth-century poets" (PJ 83), an occupation she had enjoyed until her marriage years ago, Prudence wonders why she cannot find a satisfactory man with whom to settle down and marry. Unlike Mildred, who feels dowdy and ordinary and therefore attracts few men, Prudence is attractive and well-dressed and attracts many men. These men, however, are ordinary and insignificant, and fail to live up to what Jane or Prudence expect, causing Jane to speculate on woman's capacity to make men feel "that they were loved and admired and desired when they were worthy of none of these things" (75). She realizes that women's power in love and in their imaginations transforms ordinary, indistinctive men into extraordinary, remarkable beings (Lee 87). In spite of the fact that the men in her life never become significant to her in the way she would like, Prudence misses the coziness of marriage and the

experience of having children. Like Mildred, she feels isolated and lonely. Longing for both romantic love and long-term emotional fulfillment, she fails to see that the two are contradictory, and continues to embark on "doomed" love affairs (Lee 201).

Lee notes that Jane and Prudence are alike in the sense that "both are romantics who still have their own unique worlds of imagination" (86), yet each character responds differently to her situation. While Jane becomes a "mature observer of life" (86), Prudence fails to become perceptive through her trials and errors. Jane finally develops a sense of detachment, enabling herself to look compassionately at her husband as well as the "undistinguished" and "unremarkable beings" (PJ 217) Prudence continues to bring to Jane for introduction. Jane's "rare combination of detachment and sympathy" (Lee 88) allows her to accept human limitations and to love people as they are; therefore, she no longer feels victimized by her disappointments in marriage and in life, but prefers to view her situation with the detached amusement of one who has accepted the shortcomings of her situation and finds contentment in what remains.

Even though Pym's novels are replete with dim and mousy spinsters, such as Belinda Bede in *Some Tame Gazelle* and Mildred Lathbury, Dora Caldicote, and Winifred Malory in *Excellent Women*, Pym did at times turn her attention to the situations of unmarried women who are attractive, for instance Prudence Bates in *Jane and Prudence* and the insidious Allegra Gray in *Excellent Women*. But in *Less Than Angels*, Pym introduced a new kind of heroine, one who has a career that she enjoys and that sustains her economically, albeit modestly. And once again her heroine finds that she is not completely fulfilled by love, and that she must eke out her pleasures and accomplishments in a male-dominated world that seeks to

undervalue and subordinate her. She is also unique in Pym's fiction for her refusal to accept the limits imposed by the patriarchal system; therefore, she fails to fit into Pym's paradigm of recognition => adjustment => acceptance. But even though she will not place men's needs and importance above her own, she nevertheless has a serene acceptance of the world and its imperfections. She simply refuses to be a victim, even though it costs her an important relationship during the course of the novel.

Unlike Prudence, who is only "a sort of personal assistant" to her employer and looks after only "the humdrum side of his work" (JP 10), and Mildred, who works part-time for an organization that assists impoverished women, Catherine Oliphant enjoys her career as a writer of short stories and articles for women's magazines. A savvy and keen observer of people, she finds her niche in a shabby flat in London, which she has made cozy and inviting. Overall, she is happy with her untidy appearance and believes that looking "a little ragged" (7) fits in with the fashion of the day. She has a strong sense of self-esteem because her work provides a creative outlet for her and allows her the freedom to live her life as she pleases.

Also, she is involved with Tom Mallow, an anthropologist, who does field work in Africa. Their relationship in some ways appears ideal because Tom's long absences give Catherine time to pursue her own career and interests, while providing a pattern of comfort and emotional satisfaction when he is around. Even though she feels there is "Not much rapture now" (69) in their relationship, "it was nice to have him about the place again" (69). Like Pym's other characters, she desires love, companionship, romance, and respect in her relationship and likes to feel needed. Therefore, she cooks for Tom and looks after him when he is around. But unlike many unmarried Pymian women, Catherine does not seem desperate to marry. Her victimization arises out of the fact that she does not revere Tom and his career the way he and other males expect her to.

The men in the novel value women only for their ability to provide assistance in their careers and comfort and support in their emotional lives.

She realizes Tom is not the kind of man she had imagined for her husband; she had pictured one that "would be a strong character who would rule her life, but Tom, at twenty-nine, was two years younger than she was and it was always she who made the decisions and even mended the fuses" (27). Because the novel was written about contemporary England in 1955, the date of publication of the novel, Pym found herself creating a self-sufficient heroine just as the women's movement was beginning to take hold among the female populace. Even with all its positive promise, Pym felt that the social milieu was confusing to both men and women alike. Catherine, like other Pymian characters, has had a traditional upbringing in which she has been taught to value the needs of men over her own and to expect protection, social position, and economic stability in return. Yet she finds herself in a relationship that contrasts to the popular, romantic paradigm, one in which she feels stronger and in many ways, more capable of dealing with life. The romance she had expected is also missing from the relationship, and Catherine feels she and Tom are "just like an old married couple . . . where dullness rather than cosiness seemed to be the keynote of the relationship" (69).

The novel also centers around Dierdre Swan, a young and attractive student of anthropology, who falls in love with Tom. Dierdre lives with her mother and unmarried aunt in the suburbs of London and desires escape from her boredom in a romantic relationship with Tom. He is older, handsome, and aristocratic. When she meets Tom in the library she, like many women before her, takes an immediate liking to him, although "he did not lay himself out to be particularly interesting to Dierdre or to ask her anything

about herself" (52). And since Tom feels ignored because Catherine is "busy finishing a story and seeming to have no time for him," (51), he begins to take Dierdre out because she shows him the adoration he craves and has come to expect from women. Like Everard Bone in *Excellent Women*, Tom views women as subordinate to him, and sees them in the light of how useful they can be to him. When he and Dierdre part from one of their early meetings, she looks longingly at him with the unspoken question, "'When shall I see you again?'" (67). But his impulse is simply to ask, "'Are you any good at typing?'" (67).

While Catherine realizes her strength and assertiveness may be driving Tom away, she also realizes that Tom is attracted to Dierdre because she is "still young enough to be moulded" (76) by a man. Also, while Dierdre loves Tom unconditionally, Catherine, "being older, had already been too much of a personality in her own right, always wanting to make him conform to her idea of what he ought to be" (152). Therefore the relationship between Catherine and Tom is jeopardized and finally dissolves because Catherine is too strong for Tom and brings out in him feelings of resentment. He is unhappy when Catherine makes fun of him and his obsession with his thesis and prefers instead the reverence and devotion he receives from Dierdre. When he and Catherine split up, he tells her, "'In a way, I feel that [Dierdre] needs me and a man likes to feel that sometimes'" (113). Even though Tom is attracted in some ways to Catherine's intelligence and perky personality and enjoys the shelter and creature comforts she provides when he returns from the field, he is unable to break away from his stereotypical views about women's supposed passivity and dependence. Dierdre has the characteristics in a woman that he has been conditioned to expect and admire, but he simply cannot make a personal connection with her. Therefore, Tom, Catherine, and Dierdre are all victimized because they are preyed upon by cultural indoctrination about the nature of the opposite sex that contrasts with their own deepest needs.

Other men of the novel also have conventional expectations of women and use them thoughtlessly. Two single, young anthropology students, Digby and Mark, are friends with Catherine throughout the novel. When they are hungry, they come "like trusting animals, expecting to be fed" (28). In her generosity and love, she never fails to disappoint them. When Catherine throws a successful party, Digby observes, "'A woman who can cook *and* type-- what more could a man want, really?" On one occasion they discover Catherine mopping her flat in the evening, bringing about the observation, "'I shouldn't like my wife to do housework in the evenings, would you?'" (28). Upon being asked by Dierdre if Catherine and Tom are living together as a couple, Digby and Mark explain to her their opinion of the nature of the couple's relationship: "'It would be a reciprocal relationship--the woman giving the food and shelter and doing some typing for him and the man giving the priceless gift of himself. . . . It's is commoner in our society than many people would suppose'" (76). In the same way that Tom feels diminished because Catherine fails to revere him and his work the way women have done for centuries past, Digby and Mark are also aware of the changing sex roles in society. As they part from Dierdre, Digby wonders if they should have seen her home. Mark chides him, saying that he really must cure himself of "'these old-fashioned ideas'" (77). Digby recognizes the difference in women now, commenting sadly that, "'Yes, of course, one's apt to forget that women consider themselves our equals now. But just occasionally one remembers that men were once the stronger sex'" (77).

Pym constantly brings up the need her female characters feel to revere men and their work. In one scene, the author humorously points out women's ingrained training to show interest in man's work. When Mrs. Foresight, a woman at an anthropology function, tries to make polite conversation with Miss Lydgate, who is in the

anthropology profession, she feels less obliged to show an interest in another woman's discussion of her work than she would a man's:

> Her expression as she listened to Miss Lydgate's plans for the writing up of her linguistic researches, was one of rather strained interest. Women must so often listen to men with just this expression on their faces, but Mrs. Foresight was feminine enough to feel that it was a little hard that so much concentration should be called for when talking to a member of her own sex. (16)

In a similar way, Dierdre looks at Tom's books, "trying to find something intelligent to say about them" (141). Later, when Catherine discusses Tom's completed thesis with Dierdre, who wonders why it is so long (497 pages), Catherine responds, "'A thesis *must* be long. The object, you see, is to bore and stupefy the examiners to such an extent that they will *have* to accept it'" (167). Whereas Dierdre attempts to accept the notion that man's work is significant, distinctive, and worthwhile, Catherine refuses to do so, giving the impression on occasion that she regards anthropology as something less than monumental. Catherine does admit, however, as she is attempting to understand why Tom has left her, that "'I don't think we can ever hope to know all that goes on in a man's life or even to follow him with our loving thoughts, and perhaps that's just as well'" (172).

The novel takes a surprising turn when Catherine learns that Tom, who returns to Africa toward the end of the novel, has been killed in a native uprising. Catherine and Dierdre both grieve for him for a couple of weeks, but finally pick up the pieces of their lives and go on again. By the time of Tom's death, Catherine has begun to see Alaric Lydgate, a rather ill-looking man who has been invalided out of the Colonial Service in Africa after many years. Like the anthropologists in the novel, he too is obsessed with the importance of his work and writing up the many boxes of notes he has

accumulated during his service. Catherine persuades him finally to burn the notes instead, and they celebrate Alaric's liberation at a bonfire of the notes.

Pym hints at the end of the story that Catherine and Alaric might marry, and the union seems promising because Alaric is not as shaped by male-dominant cultural patterns as the other men in the novel. For instance, when he allows Catherine to talk him into burning his notes, he admits his work may not have been as important as he had thought. Catherine appeals to his lighter side, and he responds to her gaiety, never feeling threatened by her intelligence, independence, or self-confidence. When she quotes poetry to him or alludes to bizarre figures from literature, he smiles at her indulgently, unlike Tom, who had been impatient with her "wild fancies and quotations" (236). Catherine realizes that Alaric, "Like so many men . . . needed a woman stronger than himself, for behind the harsh cragginess . . . cowered the small boy, uncertain of himself" (242). And Alaric seems willing to let the relationship develop without regard for enforced sexual roles. Because the two do not conform to stereotypical expectations, Pym hints that they may have a chance together. Both males and females, Pym seems to say, are victims of cultural dictates, but by breaking the age-old patterns, they may achieve happiness.

The ending is indeterminate, but one knows Catherine will manage whether she and Alaric pair up or not. Several reflections throughout the novel suggest that Catherine's resourcefulness and optimism will enable her to make the best of what life offers. She will refuse to be a victim. Catherine prefers to think of life as "an old friend, or perhaps a tiresome elderly relative, pushing, knocking, clinging, but never leaving her alone, having the power to grant her moments of happiness" (154). Like Mildred in *Excellent Women* and Jane in *Jane and Prudence*, she has developed the courage and the

adaptability to face life realistically and make the most of it. In the way of many Pym heroines, she realizes that "The small things of life were often so much bigger than the great things" (LA 104) and that the "trivial pleasures like cooking, one's home, little poems especially sad ones, solitary walks, funny things seen and overheard" (104) provide more satisfaction than the overblown pleasures of earth-shattering romances found in novels and the romantic imagination.

Pym published her fifth novel, *A Glass of Blessings* in 1958. The title of the novel refers to George Herbert's poem, "The Pulley," in which God bestows a glass full of blessings upon humans during His creation of the race. In many ways, the novel, which is described by one critic as "the most psychologically elegant of Pym's novels" (Long 109), concerns the ways in which Wilmet, the first-person narrator and main character, comes to recognize how false assumptions about marriage and about life have prevented her from enjoying the true blessings in her life. Her journey is one of self-discovery in which she, like many Pym characters before her, must learn to break through old patterns which have held her victim to unrealistic assumptions about love and marriage. This novel differs from *Excellent Women* and *Less Than Angels* because its main character is a married women, but like Jane in *Jane and Prudence*, it explores the disappointments of being married, only it does so in a more thorough manner than the latter novel, concentrating solely on one woman's life. As is the case throughout most of Pym's fiction, the issues in *A Glass of Blessings* are different to some degree, but the sense of ironic tension between one's dreams and reality that develops in *Excellent Women* and *Jane and Prudence* develops in this story also. These novels deal with women's disappointment in the areas of love and marriage and their feelings of relative unimportance in a male-dominated world.

In contrast to Mildred, who is unhappy because she is single and undervalued, Wilmet appears to have everything, yet she too is unhappy. Wilmet is an attractive and well-off, upper middle-class woman, who is married to an upper-level civil servant of the Ministry. Even though she is comfortably married, like Jane in *Jane and Prudence*, the two women are quite different. While Jane had had an intellectually stimulating educational career in which she had studied seventeenth-century poets, Wilmet has no engaging intellectual activity at all. She does not need to work, nor does she desire to have an exciting career. Since she and Rodney live with his efficient and caring mother, Wilmet does not even have to worry about maintaining a home. She spends her days shopping, arranging flowers (a talent of hers), and attending a few functions at her new church, St. Luke's. The novel's purpose is to reveal the source of Wilmet's unhappiness to her as well as the ways in which she must reconcile herself to a more realistic view of life, just as Mildred had done in *Excellent Women* and Jane had done in *Jane and Prudence.*

An astute observer of manners and morals, Pym illustrates in this novel, perhaps more than in the others, the images in fiction and the popular imagination that lead a woman to expect more than is realistically possible in a marital relationship. In "Women Victimised by Fiction: Living and Loving in the Novels of Barbara Pym," Brothers asserts that Wilmet is prey to the unrealistic portrayal of love and marriage in fiction (69). From early childhood, she has been bombarded with images of romantic love and its resultant bliss. Every woman's fulfillment and identity, says the myth, derives from a union with a man. All Pym's heroines are familiar with the story of Jane Eyre, who finally marries her beloved Rochester. Lizzie makes a perfect match with Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejuduce*; even Austen's meddlesome Emma finds true love and fulfillment with Knightly (truly her *knight* in shining

armor!). The men in these novels provide their heroines with status and identity, with economic security, and with the promise of undying devotion.

However, when couples such as Jane and Nicholas Cleveland in *Jane and Prudence* and Wilmet and Rodney Forsyth in *A Glass of Blessings*, settle into their marriages, they often discover that the reality does not meet up to the expectations they had had for themselves. Brothers says the problem is that women are "psychic victims of what might be considered a self-serving, male-created myth that a woman fulfills herself only through love " (63). Pym attacks the myth, states Brothers, because "it has prevented both men and women from seeing and accepting themselves as they are" (63). In *A Glass of Blessings* Pym's purpose is to "[contrast] her characters and their lives with those which have been presented in literature to mock the idealised view of the romantic paradigm" (62). Life is not a love story, Brothers concludes, and "Love, won or lost, effects no metamorphosis of character" (70). *A Glass of Blessings* holds a special place in Pym's fiction because it involves a metamorphosis, but the change does not occur because of the love of a man.

Reading the notes in Pym's journal from 1954 through the publication of *A Glass of Blessings* in 1958, one notices this idea that the discrepancy between what a woman expects from love and what she actually gets was one which Pym had been contemplating. For instance, on October 28, l954, Pym wrote, "Perhaps to be loved is the most cosy thing in life and yet many people, women I suppose I mean, know only the uncertainties of loving, which is only sometimes cosy when one accepts one's situation . . . " (VPE 192). In *A Glass of Blessings,* Pym articulates this topic and deals with the theme of self-discovery and accepting (to a greater degree than Jane had done in *Jane and Prudence*) "one's situation" in life. This

novel deserves a thorough discussion because it focuses so intently on how the protagonist learns to accept life's limitations and find the blessings in her life, however small. The novel's chief concern is the gradual acquisition of self-knowledge of the rather unlovable protagonist, Wilmet. Pym reveals the changes in her main character as Wilmet interacts with her circle of relatives and friends. Through them and through her own process of self-reflection, she is finally able to dispel the sense of victimization and disillusionment she feels in her marriage by discovering what it is that will make her satisfied with her husband and her life. Like other Pym heroines, Wilmet progresses through the stages of recognition => adjustment => acceptance during her journey toward self-knowledge.

When the novel opens, Wilmet is not fully aware of the source of her discontent, but she feels bored and dissatisfied with her "bleak and respectable" life (GB 10). Early on, one senses that Wilmet, like Mildred at the opening of *Excellent Women* yearns for a more exciting life and would enjoy more male attention. Her husband, Rodney, who is much like Everard Bone, is devoted to her, but is rather dull and staid after ten years of marriage. In addition, this handsome prince is now "slightly balder and fatter than [he] had been in Italy" (33), where he and Wilmet had met and had an exciting courtship during the war. But now, on this first day of the story, her husband, a rather "dry and businesslike" man (13), celebrates Wilmet's thirty-third birthday by the "transfer of a substantial sum of money to [her] account, nothing really spontaneous or romantic about it" (13). And when Sybil, her mother-in-law, thoughtfully prepares all of Wilmet's favorite dishes on this special occasion, Wilmet wryly notes that the men (Rodney had invited a colleague to dinner) "could not have realized that [these dishes] had been chosen specially for me, looking upon the whole meal as no more than was due them" (13). Also Wilmet, who always takes trouble with her clothes and "usually manages to achieve some kind of distinction"

(9) notes that her husband "seldom commented on my appearance now" (9). Even Sybil, Rodney's mother, concurs that "'civil servants don't notice what their wives wear or the wives of their colleagues'" (11), leaving the impression that the civil servants of Rodney's level and breed are rather unobservant and asexual.

But this had not been the case in Rodney's earlier days during the war. Their whirlwind romance had almost lived up to the fictional versions one might have read about in a romance novel or seen in a film. At that time, Wilmet and her friend Rowena were Wrens when they met their two "rather dashing army majors" (33). Wilmet had been homesick and found in Rodney "those peculiarly English qualities which had seemed so lovable when we had first met in Italy during the war and I had been homesick for damp green English churchyards and intellectual walks and talks in the park on a Saturday afternoon" (13). Nevertheless, Wilmet remembers that she had felt "admired and cherished" in those days (47). In one conversation, when Rodney and Wilmet are reminiscing about their time in Italy, they recall "the long evening drives in curious army vehicles . . .the rococo dining room of a particular officers' club where the Asti Spumante was warm and flat. . . [they] remembered now after ten years this had had a fantastic dreamlike quality about it" (51). And although their life is comfortable now, even Rodney is aware of discrepancy between the early days of their relationship and their present, too contented (on his part), reality. Part of the problem, says Janice Rossen, stems from "man's self-sufficiency" and woman's feeling that man does not need woman except as a function (65). She quotes Pym's entry in her journal during a time when Pym was fond of a young man, but could not think of a suitable gift to give him: "'One couldn't really give him anything that he hadn't already got. Not even devotion and/or love. It gives one a hopeless sort of feeling'" (from VPE, quoted in Rossen 65). This

feeling of hopelessness applies rather well to Wilmet also, who turns in disillusionment to other activities.

Obviously, Wilmet is influenced by fictional and popular images of the excitement in the lives of *other people*. When she and Sybil notice the memoirs of a famous opera singer on a shopping trip, Sybil notes in her understated way, "'What tremendous loves these women seem to have had in their lives . . . . It makes one's own seem so dull'" (23), to which Wilmet responds, "'Yes, but I suppose we should all be able to make our lives sound romantic if we took the trouble to write about them . . . . After all, the man one eventually marries is practically never one's first proposal, surely?'" (23-24). This romantic image, that a lucky woman is one who is able to break the hearts of several suitors before choosing the right one, is quickly deflated by Sybil, who observes that when a man is turned down by a woman, he usually finds someone to marry "'so unflatteringly soon'" (24). In this scene, Sybil, sensing Wilmet's distress in her marriage but wisely preferring to handle the situation discreetly, is aware of Wilmet's romantic tendencies yet subtly points out their fallacies. In this scene, the romantic ideal and the facts of the real world create an ironic tension (Lee 127) when Wilmet is forced once again to recognize that her own experience does not fit the idealized version, for Rodney had been the only man that had proposed to her.

With the establishment of a comfortable, but not too exciting, life for the Forsyths, Pym begins to introduce other characters who will help to effect the change in Wilmet. For instance, Piers Longridge, the dashing, single brother of her close friend Rowena, appears in the first scene of the novel. Wilmet notices him in church one day and is intrigued by his presence. Formerly of "Oxford or Cambridge" (9), Piers had recently moved to the city and obtained work as a translator and instructor of Portuguese. As Wilmet gazes sidelong at Piers, she muses that, "In novels, or perhaps more often

in parish magazine stories, one sometimes reads descriptions of 'a lonely figure kneeling at the back of the church, his head bowed in prayer'" (6), giving the reader the impression that even though Piers "was gazing about him in an interested inquisitive way" (6), Wilmet is unconsciously responding to romantic and intriguing images of solitary or mysterious figures she has read about in fiction. She notices his good looks, "with his aquiline features and fair hair" (60).

But "Poor Piers," as he is referred to by Rowena, is "vaguely unsatisfactory" because "at thirty-five he had too many jobs and his early brilliance seemed to have come to nothing. It was also held against him that he had not yet married" (6). Yet these perceptions of Piers only serve to romanticize him in Wilmet's mind. Responding to Wilmet's greetings after church, he compliments her, "'You look particularly charming today'" (9) and gazes at her in "the provocative way I remembered" (9). This interest arouses in Wilmet her need for attention and appreciation. Before parting, Piers suggests in a noncommittal way that perhaps they should meet for lunch one day, an invitation to which Wilmet eagerly responds.

Rowena's husband, Harry, who is also infatuated with Wilmet, invites Wilmet to lunch, and they too reminisce about their days in Italy. Harry reminds Wilmet of how "'gay and sweet'" (88) she had been in those days, but asserts that she is "'even more appealing'" at this moment because, "'Now there's a kind of sadness about you that wasn't there before. As if life hadn't quite turned out as you'd hoped it would'" (88-89). "'Well, does it ever--quite?'" (89), she interjects. Wilmet's response shows that she is constantly comparing her present life with her earlier, more romantic one, always finding that the present one fails to live up to her more cherished, if somewhat embellished, past. However, when Harry makes overt, romantic overtures toward her, she does not respond

to him because Harry does not meet the romantic standard she prefers. Part of the problem is that she knows him too well and is beyond feeling romantic toward a man about whom she really has no illusion. Like Rodney, he too is "balder and fatter" (33) than when he had been in Italy. She sees him now as "one of those non-intellectual men who . . . . might not have any very interesting conversation for his wife at the end of the day, might indeed quite easily drop off to sleep after dinner" (37). Even though Wilmet enjoys his attention, she is searching for someone more exciting than Harry, someone who lives up to her romantic ideal.

Actually, another man, formerly of *Excellent Women,* serves as the romantic ideal for both Wilmet and Rowena (as well as Mildred Lathbury in the earlier novel). Rocky Napier was the handsome flag lieutenant to one of the admirals in Italy. Both Rowena and Wilmet had been in love with him for a short time, and when his name comes up on Wilmet's weekend visit, the two women have a moment of "rapturously reminiscent silence" (36) in memory of the dashing lieutenant. During their encounters with Rocky, Wilmet and Rowena had sent him poetry and love letters, as the romantic standard demanded. But now Rowena recalls that Rocky "'lives in the country with that rather formidable wife, and they have a child--just think of it!'" (36). Even the exciting Rocky has settled into family life and lost his luster for the two former admirers. The two become more serious when they reflect on the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood, and when Rowena expresses pity for Wilmet's never having had children, her friend admits, "'It makes one feel rather useless'" (37). This sentiment sounds much like those uttered by Mildred, pointing up the fact that most of Pym's women, whether married or not, feel useless and inadequate because of their secondary status in society.

In addition, then, to being dissatisfied with married life because it does not meet with popular shibboleths about love and marriage,

Wilmet must also deal with her feelings of uselessness. It might be assumed here that finding a satisfying career would help to eliminate these feelings; however, Rodney retains the old-fashioned idea that a wife should not work unless it is financially necessary. And Wilmet herself protests, "Moreover, I was not trained for any career and hated to be tied down to a routine" (17-18). The story takes place in the 1950's, points out Mason Cooley, and "Wilmet is living according to the tradition of her class, though the tradition has waned enough to become problematic for her" (146). But when Sybil helpfully suggests Wilmet might take Piers's Portuguese lessons for "'intellectual occupation'" (17), Wilmet becomes defensive, for she "feels guilty about [her] long idle days" (17).

Therefore she proposes a set of "autumn plans" (18), which include taking more part in the life of St. Luke's, trying to befriend Piers Longridge and perhaps going to his classes. With this resolve, Wilmet has a plan for overcoming her sense of discontent and uselessness. However, she does not even attempt to formulate a plan to improve her marriage. As Rossen sees it, *A Glass of Blessings* and Pym's novels in general "reflect the frustration women feel in never being able to enter a man's world, or to be seen as significant to men" (65). Therefore, feeling superfluous in Rodney's life, Wilmet hopes to do better with Piers in the coming months.

During this time Wilmet is more interested in cultivating her friendship with Piers than in becoming closer to Mary. She and Piers meet for a lunch date and enjoy themselves, strolling along the river after lunch. As the afternoon begins to wane and Wilmet says goodbye, she reflects, "Perhaps I had helped to make him a little happier by my company and that might be something" (73). Because Wilmet feels so superfluous in Rodney's life, this date makes her happy for two reasons. First, Piers is giving her the romantic

attention she craves, and second, she is feeling useful by making someone happy. Since Piers is a "Byronic" character, who is moody and irresponsible (Brothers 69), Wilmet hopes to cultivate this relationship with him in order to feel she is helping him overcome his problems.

Wilmet justifies her time with Piers by convincing herself that her motivations are altruistic. She has realized that she feels better when she is being useful, and she is making gains in other areas of her life; however, she continues to avoid assessing her relationship with Rodney. He seems so self-sufficient and out of touch with her life, yet Wilmet is so sure of Rodney's fidelity that she sees no need to speculate about his activities or his satisfaction with her as his wife. Therefore, when Piers asks her whether Rodney will mind their having lunch together, she responds, "'He wouldn't mind at all . . . . Rodney's not a jealous type'" (70). She complacently assumes that she can pursue an exciting male relationship (which she tells herself is for the purpose of *helping* Piers) without suspecting that Rodney is also taking out an attractive woman he met through a civil servant friend. Wilmet does not feel guilty about her lunches with Harry and Piers because after all, "it made no difference to our fundamental relationships--or did it?" (89).

About the time Christmas season arrives, several incidents force Wilmet to view her life more carefully. For one thing, Wilmet realizes she has not completed her goal of becoming more involved at St. Luke's. She has been able to help one of her husband's acquaintances obtain employment as the cook for the parish house, and she feels good that she has been able to help. But when she attends one of the Christmas services, she notes with disappointment that "Other devoted hands had decorated the church with lilies, white chrysanthemums and holly, and I wished that I might have had a share in it" (99). Since Wilmet has a talent for

arranging flowers, and since she would like to feel more useful at St. Luke's, she is saddened to see her talents going to waste and is moved by the loving care that has gone into the decorations. She is now ready to become involved and wants to put her talents to use.

In part, this added disappointment over the decorations brings the reflection from Wilmet that "Christmas always makes me feel rather sad" (94). She remembers the happiness and excitement the season had brought when she was a child. And because she has failed to let go of childish romantic fantasies in her adult life and is unable to enjoy the true purpose of Christmas, she foresees "only too clearly the pattern of grown up Christmases for the rest of one's life" (94). For this reason, Wilmet does not look forward the "dry conversation" (94) of Sybil and Professor Root and the lackluster holiday . She knows the special day will end with Rodney dropping her off for Midnight Mass and picking her up when it is finished.

But something does happen during the season which livens up the holiday for her and reinforces her romantic illusions. An anonymous gift arrives in the mail, a delicate, heart-shaped box with Victorian touches. Inscribed on the lid, she reads:

> If you will not when you may
> When you will you shall have nay. (96)

As Wilmet puzzles over the mysterious words, she remembers a recent phone conversation with Piers in which he had begged her to meet him that night. The memory of the conversation, and of Piers's impulsiveness, and now the arrival of the lovely box fills her "with an agitation that was half painful and half pleasurable" (96). When she returns to the drawing-room, she feel "like the heroine of a Victorian novel, for I had thrust the little box into the pocket of my dress so as to hide it" (96). She assumes Piers has sent the gift, that he

> must have been walking in some street where there were

> antique shops . . . and had seen the box in a window and thought it would be just right for me, being the kind of thing I like and the words so appropriate to my refusal or inability to spend an evening with him. Of course it was all a joke, really, but it gave me a pleasant feeling of being remembered in a rather special way. (98)

In this passage Wilmet is consciously enjoying the comparison of her life with its romantic delusions to the delicious romance of a Victorian novel, and even though she tries to temper the situation by calling the gift a joke, she nevertheless indulges herself in the fanciful notions she derives from it.

Wilmet makes a fundamental error here, for in believing the box to be from Piers, she takes the inscription to be an "invitation for amorous dalliance" (Rossen 66). The painful truth will come later when she realizes that Piers offers her nothing. When she discovers later that Harry had sent the box rather than Piers, she feels "so deflated and stupid . . . . " (137). But now, opening her gift from Rodney, an extravagant and expensive string of pearls, she feels that "for some obscure reason I hardly deserved them" (104). Wilmet's low self-esteem and her guilt over the less expensive, but more exciting, gift from an anonymous male admirer prevent her from enjoying the beautiful pearls and from realizing that she already has "a glass full of blessings."

Also, something happens about this time that enables Wilmet to see her husband in a new light. She describes the winter as unusually "hard" and "cruel" (148) in February and March, but to her surprise Rodney, who is usually rather passive and indolent in Wilmet's opinion, becomes a resourceful and energetic man about the house, one who enjoys "lagging pipes, unfreezing the tank and dealing with a neighbour's burst pipe in the middle of the night" (148). His protection and efficient handling of the crises are greatly appreciated by Wilmet, who begins to wonder "if I really knew the

man I had married, for I had not hitherto suspected these talents" (148). At least in these practical ways, Wilmet has discovered a source of admiration for her husband, for his handling of these duties make her feel more comfortable and pampered.

At this point in her education, however, just as Wilmet is beginning to discover new talents in her husband (or rather, see talents he has always had, but which she in her self-absorbed way has never bothered to notice), she nevertheless wavers between this rediscovery of her husband and indulging her imagination with thoughts of Piers. Indeed, Wilmet would find it difficult to imagine Piers competently dealing with a frozen pipe, yet he still reigns in her imagination as an exciting, Byronic figure who needs her.

A lunch date between Rowena and Wilmet about this time is important also, for it reveals that Wilmet still clings to an unrealistic image of what she would like her life to be. When Rowena playfully suggests they ought to be in "'*Venice* with a *lover*!'" (149), the two think immediately of Rocky Napier as the person whom they would choose. As they dissolve in giggles, Rowena responds to their conversation with a maturity revealing that she has much more realistic expectations about life than Wilmet. She has let go of the romantic fancies of her youth and enjoys laughing at life's earlier illusions. Without any regret, she tells Wilmet,

> ". . . we're both so respectable. Neither of us has had a lover, or is ever likely to. The idea has got translated into something remote, even comfortable now. Like morning coffee with a woman friend in a country town--none of the uncertain rapture and agony of those Rocky Napier days!" (149)

But Wilmet, who is still clinging to her romantic version of the world, suddenly wants "to break the mould of respectability" into which Rowena has cast her and to protest,"'Speak for yourself'"

(149).

Even though Rowena's life is not as carefree as Wilmet's because of her demanding husband and her three children, she is the more content of the two because she feels needed and useful in her home. She has put aside the desire for a story-book life which one might expect in romantic novels, but prefers instead the "strong and reliable" (37) man who provides for her and her children. Rowena might well serve as an effective role model for her friend, but Wilmet is simply not ready to see the truth. Rather than viewing herself as victimized by her own unrealistic romantic ideas, Wilmet sees Rowena as less fortunate. When Harry irritates Wilmet during a weekend visit by holding her hand behind Rowena's back, she feels, "Perhaps Harry was not so solid and reliable after all" (39). Harry's innocent attempts to flirt with Wilmet reinforce in a convoluted way Wilmet's impression that Harry is not good enough for her because he does not meet her romantic ideal. Part of the ideal is fidelity to one's wife. Wilmet fails to apply her own standards about a man's fidelity to herself because she does not yet see her relationship with Piers as one which would challenge her fidelity.

As Rowena and Wilmet part, Rowena remarks what a lovely day it has been, just the kind of day "'when a wife hopes her husband may bring her back some exciting present'" (154). In response to Rowena's comment, Wilmet admits that Rodney does occasionally buy her an unexpected present, but "never just because it happened to be a lovely day" (156). However, when Wilmet returns home to discover the delivery of roses and assumes they are for her, she is perplexed to learn that Professor Root has sent them to Sybil. She sees her mother-in-law as "hardly the kind of person who invited these spontaneous tributes of admiration" (155). In Wilmet's disillusionment, she cannot comprehend that two old people can share the kind of joy that roses sent spontaneously can elicit. Once

Wilmet recovers from her shock and confusion over the roses, she quickly adjusts and admits it really is "rather sweet of Professor Root" (156). Yet when Rodney comes home without a present for her, she feels "restless and dissatisfied" (156). Therefore, she turns her thoughts to Piers and phones him to set up another lunch.

This second meeting is important because it shows that Wilmet is still deceiving herself to some degree about her motive in seeing Piers. She tells herself she wants to help make someone (Piers) happy. And it is true that Wilmet desperately needs to feel useful, but it is actually she who is on the receiving end during their time together, for Piers teases, cajoles, and compliments Wilmet in the charming way that Rodney lacks. Yet Piers is aware of her spoiled side, and chides her gently when her blindness to her own snobbery and arrogance become too obvious or annoying to him. What Piers seems to admire in Wilmet is simply her "'air of leisure and elegance'" (161). When he tells Wilmet their date must be cut short because he must return to work (unlike their first meeting when he had taken the entire afternoon off), Wilmet sees this as a new resolve in Piers to be more responsible and asks him if he is "'turning over a new leaf?'" (162). She wants to believe that she is influencing him in a positive way.

When it is time for the two to part, she offers herself to him in some vague way that she herself does not fully understand, pleading, "'I hate to think of you being depressed. If only I could help you in some way!'" (162). She realizes that her attraction toward Piers is growing and reflects, "I was in the kind of exalted mood when all one's sensibilities seem to be sharpened" (162). She reiterates her offer, "'Piers. . . if there *was* ever anything I could do--'" (162), but his only response is, "'You're very sweet'" as he buys her a bus ticket and sends her on her way (162). After she has left, she wonders just what she had meant by her offer and concludes, "I felt that Piers really needed me as few people did. Certainly not Rodney, I told

myself, justifying my foolish indulgence. Piers needed love and understanding, perhaps already he was happier because of knowing me" (163).

Janice Rossen says of Wilmet's behavior here, ""This flattering view of her own womanly powers is not entirely without precedent, stemming as it does from a time-honored chivalrous tradition which holds that 'lovely woman' provides inspiration to man and civilizes him by her graceful ways" (65). It is in keeping with Wilmet's romantic nature that she see herself in this light. And as another critic points out, Wilmet, who is too intelligent and vigorous to complain and fancy herself ill-used by her husband, prefers a romance with Piers not only to help him, but to provide the excitement lacking in her marriage (Cooley 147). The project is perfect for Wilmet, who is attempting to combine "erotic adventure with moral edification, perhaps the 'rescue' of a lonely, attractive man who had strayed into a poor way of living" (147). Cooley also sees the early Wilmet of the novel as much like Madame Bovary, "A beautiful young married woman, imaginative and restless, bored by her dutiful husband, seeking, not quite consciously at first, an affair that will make her commonplace life into an adventure" (147). Both Madam Bovary and Wilmet are guided "by a set of propositions, sanctioned by literature and tradition, that turn out not to apply" (Cooley 148). But from there on, Wilmet breaks the analogy and departs from the less fortunate Emma Bovary.

During this period of time when Wilmet is still struggling to resolve the tension in her life between seeking fulfillment with her husband and preferring the excitement and illicit attention of a dashing ne'er-do-well who could never keep her happy for long, she is making gains in her friendship with Mary Beamish, a dowdy and virtuous spinster whose overtures for friendship Wilmet had disdained earlier in the novel. Their relationships with men become

the topic that finally allows them to develop a friendlier bond. Mary, who has been living in a convent following the death of her mother, has decided she is not suited to be a nun and summons Wilmet for a talk, alluding to a strange letter from Marius Ransome, the handsome parish priest who had lived with Mary and her mother for a short time. Both Mary and Wilmet had been concerned because Marius had announced that he was contemplating leaving the Anglican church to become a Roman Catholic, and evidently Marius has been writing Mary for advice. She confides to Wilmet in her self-deprecating way, "'I feel he *needs* me in some way--my advice, of course--though that sounds very conceited I know, and obviously nothing *I* could say would make any difference'" (165), to which Wilmet eagerly responds, "'I know just what you mean . . . and I think men *do* need women in that way, for our advice and strength which is sometimes greater than theirs'" (165).

Wilmet of course is thinking of her relationship with Piers and is showing signs of an increased self-esteem, for earlier she had felt her existence in her relationship to her husband and at home superfluous. Like Catherine in *Less Than Angels* and Jane in *Jane and Prudence*, she is beginning to see the quiet superiorities of women. And feeling this sense of sharing with Mary, she says, "I was thinking that Mary was a little bit human after all, and what a strange coincidence it was that we should both at this moment be in rather similar positions. In some curious way Piers needed me, and Marius needed her. Perhaps it made a little bond of happiness between us, for everybody wants to be needed, women especially" (165). Even though Wilmet shows growth and maturity here, a moment later she wonders if Mary is in love with Marius and dismisses the idea immediately because "even if he stayed where he was and decided to marry, he would choose somebody younger and more attractive than Mary" (166), revealing that her fairy-tale convictions about life continue to color her perceptions. Wilmet at

least shows compassion and generosity for her friend by insisting that Mary come and stay with her and Rodney until she gets settled again.

Because Wilmet has refused to examine her marriage with Rodney and because her program of self-improvement thus far has excluded her marriage, she continues to think of Piers quite often and finally arranges to have a third and final lunch with him. On this visit, Wilmet is particularly susceptible, partly because she had issued a sort of standing invitation to Piers last time and is anticipating in some vague way its outcome, and partly because it is a breathtakingly beautiful spring day, the kind one likes to share with someone special. She muses that May is "the most romantic of all the months," with air as delicate as white wine (188-89). Wilmet wonders briefly how odd it seems that Sybil sends her off to this lunch with her blessing, but decides, "She could not know the delicious walking-on-air feeling that pervaded me as I hurried across the park" (188).

To fulfill her romantic fantasy, Wilmet dresses in a deep coral poplin and feels "at my best now" and wonders if people are looking at her as she passes them (189). But when she sees "a drab-looking woman in a tweed skirt and crumpled pink blouse" (189), she is again confronted with reality and suddenly feels embarrassed and asks, "What could her life have held?" (189). Feeling a little guilty (the old Wilmet would not have given the woman in the pink blouse a second thought), Wilmet nevertheless rushes toward her rendezvous. Unable to squelch the romantic impulse and the headiness of the spring day, she tells Piers she would adore jumping in among the blooming lupins. Piers is a bit put off by Wilmet's "enthusiasm," and admonishes her to be "'cool and dignified, and behave perfectly in character--not plunging in among lupins'" (189). Wilmet is indeed surprised to find that she is perceived as cool and dignified because

she feels that does not make her sound "very lovable'" (190) to him. It is now Piers's turn to be surprised because he does not realize until this moment that Wilmet wants to be perceived as lovable. When the couple realize they are at total cross-purposes with one another, Piers blurts, "'Wilmet, what's the matter with you? You're talking like one of the cheaper women's magazines'" (190). Wilmet's dismayed thought is that "Love is the cheapest of all emotions . . . or such a universal one that it makes one talk like a cheap magazine" (190). Nevertheless she attempts to salvage the day by firmly requesting to see where Piers lives.

After a rather uncomfortable walk, the two go to a local grocery store to join up with Keith, Piers's roommate, whom she assumes is a colleague. But Wilmet is taken aback when she sees the young man because he does not meet her expectations of a suitable roommate. Keith is young and "absurd," according to Wilmet, with "bristly hair like a hedgehog or porcupine" (193), not the intellectual or aristocratic sort she expects. Then when Keith and Piers get into an spat over what kind of bacon to buy, Wilmet feels with air of unreality "as if something had come to an end" (193).

The three arrive at the men's flat where Keith fusses over the arrangements for tea. Wilmet cannot help but observe that he has gone to a great deal of trouble to make the flat presentable and comfortable. Fresh flowers adorn the table and paper napkins sit neatly over each plate where fresh cakes will be served. By this point Wilmet must face the reality that it is not she who has been helping Piers become more responsible or more happy, but Keith! Despite her ghastly realization that Piers has a homosexual lover, and the revelation that Keith sometimes models for crocheting magazines (Wilmet is truly horrified by this piece of news), she sees how hard Keith is trying to win her approval and decides she must praise Keith's preparations, "judiciously or even extravagantly" (196). And to Wilmet's credit, she is touched by his respectful and

chatty manner and therefore honestly admits to herself, "I was going to find it impossible to dislike Keith" (196). Under the circumstances, Keith and Wilmet have a courteous visit, ending with an invitation for Keith to come to tea one day, to which the young man eagerly responds. Wilmet's about-face toward Keith indicates she still judges people by her former standards, but has become a more resilient and compassionate person and is beginning to see through her own false perceptions. But she has yet to assimilate the full meaning of the afternoon's disclosure.

When Piers escorts Wilmet out, she admits how surprised she is at his roommate, which she had always assumed was a colleague of similar education and class. Perturbed, he rebukes her, "'But aren't we all colleagues, in a sense, in this grim business of getting through life as best we can?'" (198). He goes further with, "'My dear girl, what's the matter? Do you think I've been deceiving you, or something absurd like that?'" (198). Piers next confronts Wilmet with her narrowmindedness over Keith's modeling, reminding her that there are "'in fact quite a few million people outside the narrow select little circle that makes up Wilmet's world'" (199). And even though Wilmet is on the brink of tears, Piers delivers the final blow: "'Perhaps I've gone too far. After all I didn't really mean to imply that you're to blame for what you are. Some people as less capable of loving their fellow human beings than others'" (199). In abject despair and humiliation, Wilmet must finally admit, "'Perhaps I had never really known him, or--what was worse--myself. That anyone could doubt my capacity to love!" (199).

Wilmet's moment of self-discovery occurs in the taxi on the way home. As she thinks over the events of the afternoon, she feels

> . . .battered and somehow rather foolish, very different from the carefree girl who had set out across the park to meet Piers. But I was not a girl. I was a married woman, and if I

> felt wretched it was no more than I deserved for having let my thoughts stray to another man. . . . And the ironical thing was that it was Keith, that rather absurd little figure, who had brought about the change I thought I had noticed in Piers and which I had attributed to my own charms and loving care! (200)

During this period of the novel, Wilmet is in the recognition phase of the structural paradigm of recognition => adjustment => acceptance. She has begun to recognize the sources which cause her suffering (her own false presumptions about romance and love, which have been a part of her upbringing) and now must adjust to the realities of life. This adjustment period involves a renewed analysis of the important relationships and events in her life.

A sadder, wiser Wilmet returns home to find that Mary has arrived for her stay, and Wilmet is relieved to have someone to help take her mind off her own problems. She plans for the two to shop together, go to movies, have lunch together. She knows that "time would pass and that I should feel better" (201). Since Rodney is a bit uncomfortable with Mary there, he decides to be out this evening, causing Wilmet to reflect, "It might be, after all, that I with my sheltered life was in some ways more fitted to deal with certain things, for which Rodney with public school and university, the war in Italy, and the Civil Service, was inadequate" (201).

Pym explores the idea again here of women's superiority in social realms and the gradual ways in which women assume responsibility. This realization is significant because it shows that Wilmet's self-esteem is improving and that she no longer feels quite so useless and superfluous in Rodney's life. She is beginning to take more charge in matters of the home and feels more competent. As her romantic delusions start to fade, she begins to have more realistic perceptions about her relationship with her husband. She quits thinking only of her own dissatisfaction and turns her thoughts to

Rodney. One night, for instance, she asks Sybil, who has been knitting a sweater for Professor Root, if she can look at her book of sweater patterns because she has decided to knit Rodney a sweater. This is Wilmet's first attempt to move beyond her own egocentricity and to do something thoughtful for her husband.

Even though her relationship with Piers is shattered, a couple of other severe jolts remain which will finally shock Wilmet out of the unrealistic romantic delusions to which she has remained victim. Wilmet spends the next few weeks healing and assessing her behavior. She is soothed by Mary's visit and the two have a chance to get to know one another better. Mary notices the changes in Wilmet, remarking that, "'You're always belittling yourself lately'" and seem "'different since I came out of the convent. . . .As if - well - you'd been disappointed in some way about something, perhaps lost confidence in yourself a bit'" (205). She admits to Mary, "'Life isn't always all it's cracked up to be . . . . And then sometimes you discover that you aren't as nice as you thought you were--that you're in fact rather a horrid person'" (205-06). Mary's generous rebuttal is, "'What nonsense--that wouldn't possibly apply to you! . . . And even if it did, I suppose a person would be even nicer if they could make a discovery like that and admit the truth of it'" (206). Mary's kindness and perception here help Wilmet to realize that self-knowledge and inner growth do not come without great personal suffering.

With Mary's help, Wilmet is able to take part in decorating the church for the final service by the retiring Father Thames and feels happy in "the charmed circle of decorators" (206). When she observes with satisfaction the "carpet of leaves and flowers which covered the nave . . .with its many candles embowered in green leaves, lilies, and carnations" (206), she knows she is in her element. Wilmet even regrets not having invited Piers and Keith to this special ceremony. Becoming comfortable with herself and

learning not to judge people according to her previous harsh standards, it now seems to her "as if the Church should be the place where all worlds could meet, and looking around me I saw that in a sense this was so. If people remained outside it was our--even *my*--duty to try to bring them in" (209). And she is happy that she is "able to smile now" when she remembers the "extravagant dreams" about Piers only a few weeks ago (214).

Yet if Wilmet is to become truly reconciled with herself, she must also resolve her problems with Rodney. She must acquire a healthy, balanced, and realistic attitude toward love and marriage. With time, the events in Wilmet's life begin to coalesce so that she becomes a more integrated person. She is busy at church; she has embraced the odd array of fellow church goers; she has befriended Keith; and she has drawn closer to Mary. She even begins to make some improvements in her relationship with Rodney. The two of them go for a weekend to visit Rowena and Harry and have such a good time there that they "could almost have imagined [them]selves back in Italy in [their] carefree youth" (216).

But when the couple arrives back in London, they receive the news that Sybil and Professor Root are to marry. Wilmet is shocked because she still has not put aside childish ideas that only young and beautiful people fall in love and marry. Her first impression is that the whole idea is "some outrageous joke" (221). She is baffled that "Sybil [is] to be Professor Root's wife! But she was Rodney's mother and my mother-in-law--how could she ever be anything else?" (221). She overcomes these vestiges of immaturity and short-sightedness and finally recovers. Just as she had quickly adjusted when she discovered Keith was Piers's lover, here she rapidly adjusts her thinking again to assimilate this new twist in her life. She and Rodney announce they will cancel their plans for the trip to Portugal the four had planned in the summer so that Sybil and the Professor

can spend the trip as their honeymoon. Wilmet's heart sinks at the news that she and Rodney will go instead to Cornwall for their holiday, but she says nothing.

The younger Forsyths are shocked a second time when they learn they will have to move out of Sybil's house and find their own home. The observant and sagacious Sybil, who has taken notice all along of Wilmet's and Rodney's marital malaise, perceives Wilmet will enjoy having her own home where she can assert her talents and have more privacy with her husband. And when Rodney suggests several neighborhood options far away, Wilmet resolves to pick a small house or flat near St. Luke's where she can be useful and involved.

Wilmet must once again confront news that forces her to see the falseness of her preconceived ideas about romance and marriage when she goes to visit Mary, who has a new position as keeper of a retreat house for clergy. She learns from Mary that Marius has asked her to marry him. Earlier, Wilmet had dismissed the idea, and now she is astonished "that such a good looking man as Marius Ransome should want to marry anyone so dim and mousy as Mary Beamish. But as soon as I had pushed aside this unworthy thought I realized what a good wife she would make for a clergyman, especially one as unstable as Marius appeared to be" (228). This is the third quick adjustment in thinking Wilmet has had to accomplish, which shows her new, more open-minded attitude. She realizes that men do not always choose wives based on her own scale of values, but on their own deeper and personal needs.

In addition, while Wilmet is staying at the retreat house, she discovers a special "pagan" (226) area of garden out back among the apple trees where she goes to toss the empty pea pods into the compost heap. For some reason, Wilmet is taken with this fertile heap and the mental images it produces. Imagining "all this richness decaying in the earth and new life springing out of it" (226), she recalls Andrew Marvell's lines, "My vegetable love should grow/

Vaster than Empires and more slow . . ." Wilmet is enchanted with this rich garden and the buzzing of the beehives with life, but does not comprehend its spiritual significance to her until later that night.

When Wilmet goes to bed that night, she sorts through the many things that have happened to her lately and realizes in a moment of intense self-awareness,

> It seemed as if life had been going on around me without my knowing it, in the disconcerting way that it sometimes does. . . .Sybil and Professor Root, Piers and Keith, Marius and Mary. . . all doing things without, as it were, consulting me. And now Rodney and I would have to set up house on our own, a curious and rather disconcerting thought. I tried to remember our time in Italy, but all that came into my mind were curious irrelevant little pictures. (230)

Pym delightfully ties the idea of casting off the old and starting anew in Wilmet's life with the luscious garden Wilmet had visited earlier; the compost heap behind the retreat house becomes a metaphor for the rebirth of Wilmet. As the heap behind the garden decomposes into a rich humus, fostering and nourishing new life, so too Wilmet, who has cast off the old myths and misconceptions of her earlier life, will be reborn into a richer, more understanding human being, whose "vegetable love" (i.e. dispassionate) will grow as it does in the poem. She will reach out to provide nourishment for those who know her in her personal relationships and in her church mission. According to Robert Long, the garden is important because it becomes a "'primitive confessional,'" where Wilmet is relieved of the "'guilt'" she feels, makes her "'confession'" and begins a new life (124).

As the threesome of Sybil, Rodney, and Wilmet dissolves into a twosome, Rodney and Wilmet begin to go out more together and start

frequenting the Cenerentola coffee bar where Keith works in the evenings (Cenerentola is the Italian word for Cinderella). The place is lush with live greenery and the buzz of young patrons, reminding Wilmet of the garden behind the retreat house. Seeing the vibrant life going on around him, Rodney remarks on their first visit, "'Good heavens. . . . This *is* life, isn't it? I always felt we should perhaps get out and about more, but I hadn't realized *quite* how out of touch we were'" (234). His statement reflects a flexibility and awareness developing in Rodney, who, it is to be hoped, will take the cue from his wife and help to enliven the ten-year marriage with fresh activity and open-mindedness.

Wilmet reveals in the penultimate chapter of *A Glass of Blessings* that the hunt for and move into a new house injects new life and satisfaction into the couple's relationship, although the basic differences in Rodney and Wilmet remain. For instance, after the experience in the garden, Wilmet leans toward wanting a place in the country, while Rodney cannot stand the thought of struggling to work during the winter through the rain and muddy fields. Therefore, they compromise and do the "safe and dull" (247) thing by buying a flat "a stone's throw from Sybil's house and a good hundred feet closer to the clergy house" than Sybil's home had been (247). The whole process brings them "closer together than we had been for years" (247). Wilmet is able to assert her authority and use her talents while decorating her new home, a job which she enjoys. The young model, Keith, whom she earlier found "absurd" (200), proves tireless in helping her choose fabrics and colors.

Wilmet's life is finally on track. She is busy with church and friends. Even Rodney, who realizes Wilmet's disappointment over their cancelled trip to Portugal, asks Wilmet if she would like to return to Italy next year, to the place of their romantic genesis, and Wilmet approves. But she insists, "'It would be better to go to the parts we don't already know. After ten years they might be too sad'"

(248). This statement is extremely cogent because it shows that Wilmet has put away her romantic fantasies and expectations. She knows that her wildly romantic period with Rodney is over and that it is useless to attempt to recover it on old soil. Therefore, she is wise to suggest that they return to Italy in order to recapture *some* of the old romance (a reasonable goal for the couple), but she knows it will be more beneficial to create new memories and traditions more suitable for them at this stage in their marriage.

Thinking back on Italy, Rodney sighs wistfully, "'Those were good days, weren't they. . . .Perhaps better than we shall ever know again'" (248), but Wilmet, who is determined to make the most of the knowledge she has gained, replies firmly and without cynicism, "'Well, we were young then. But life is supposed to get better as one grows older--even married life'" (248). In putting away childhood fantasies about the nature of love and romance and in moving into the acceptance stage of her marriage and life, she recognizes that her earlier view is for the young and immature. The mature adult must face--and embrace--the realities and the potential of modern life and marriage.

The final piece of knowledge in Wilmet's education involves a discovery that deflates the illusion about her marriage which she has continuously harbored, that her passive, staid, and unromantic husband, has been faithful to her. When Wilmet and Rodney discuss their new plans for Italy and Wilmet speaks positively of improving their marriage, Rodney is plagued with guilt, finally admitting that he has taken out the friend of a civil servant at the Ministry to dinner a couple of times. This friend is Prudence Bates, who appeared earlier as the attractive protagonist of *Prudence and Jane*. Wilmet does not know what to think of Rodney's revelation, but perceives it to be significant. She realizes that while she "had been occupied with foolish thoughts of Piers, my husband had been taking

the attractive friend of a woman civil servant out to dinner" (249). To her stiff response, Rodney becomes agitated and assures her, "'Darling, it was no more than that'" (249). At this time, Wilmet then confides to Rodney about her lunches with Piers, but Rodney quickly brushes off her admission with the statement, "'But dinner *is* rather different somehow'" (250). When Wilmet questions Rodney, she discovers to her dismay that Prudence had reminded him of Wilmet, "'rather cool and distant--'" (250).

The two finally break into a strained laughter over Rodney's description of Prudence's uncomfortable furniture, but upon pausing, Wilmet thinks, "perhaps it wasn't so funny after all. I had always regarded Rodney as the kind of man who would never look at another woman. The fact that he could--and had indeed done so--ought to teach me something about myself. . ." (250). This realization is the final flash of illumination for Wilmet, who has misjudged her husband. While she mistakenly believed that he was incapable of having romantic feelings for another woman, she must now admit that he is as human as she and has the same craving for attention and ability to stray that she has. She learns the valuable lesson never to take her husband for granted and to nurture her relationship with Rodney just as she does others in her life.

Ultimately, Wilmet breaks out of her victimization by examining the false thinking and romantic assumptions she had held and by adopting a more realistic view of life. Wilmet, who sees herself as "a distinctly Victorian figure" (Rossen 183) at the beginning of the novel and hopes to procure a happy ending as promised in her favorite novels, must, because of her new insight and experience, overturn a number of beliefs by the end of *A Glass of Blessings* (Cooley 148): The first belief (myth) is that husbands are faithful and loving, but unexciting. Wilmet finds both Rodney and Harry have within themselves the potential for infidelity, and that indeed her husband has almost had an affair with an attractive woman. The

second belief (myth) is that old or dowdy women have no chance for romance. Here again, Wilmet has had to reexamine old ideas when both Sybil and Professor Root marry and when Marius Ransome falls in love with and marries Mary Beamish (148-51). The reality in her own life and in the relationships of her loved ones forces her to see the romantic paradigm as a false set of myths.

As Wilmet is overturning old ways of thinking, Pym subtly interweaves through the novel the theme of transformation. For instance, the novel begins on Wilmet's thirty-third birthday, the day Christ died as a savior (Long 120), suggesting the image of redemption and rebirth. In addition, Wilmet attends St. Luke's Church, a name which refers to the "blessed physician" who heals the afflicted and promises atonement. Long says the Lucan theme provides a symbolic framework for Wilmet's experiences (120). Also, the Cenerentola coffee bar, with its suggestion of the Cinderella theme, hints of transformation, and even though the name is suggestive of a fairy-tale, Wilmet has outgrown her own fairy-tale version of the world by the time she starts going to the bar. She enjoys this place because of the life there, both in the lush greenery and in the young people who meet for company and community. Having outgrown her youthful romanticism, Wilmet can now sit back and observe with untinted perception the tantalizing unfolding of life around her. And as it is unrealistic to expect a sparkling and vital sexuality to awaken in Wilmet's and Rodney's relationship, Wilmet's participation in life , according to Long, will be "contemplative and vicarious" (126). Through Keith, he says, "Wilmet will be in touch with the pagan and the sexual, but she will be so, one feels, at a distance" (126). Wilmet's sense of isolation, like Mildred's before her in *Excellent Women*, will be mitigated by the spirit of the novel, which is one of "accommodation to the loss of romance, and an 'acceptance' of what remains" (127).

What remains is Wilmet's mature acceptance of life and an appreciation of her glass of blessings. She and Mary Beamish engage in a final discussion in which Mary, now happily married to Marius, beams, "'Oh Wilmet, life is perfect now! I've everything that I could possibly want. I keep thinking that it's like a glass of blessings--life I mean'" (253). When Wilmet considers Mary's happiness, she realizes she has as much as Mary, for "there was no reason why my own life should not be a glass of blessings too. Perhaps it always had been without my realizing it" (256). Wilmet's education is complete. She is no longer the victim of romantic Victorian novels and popular myth, but is a satisfied, self-aware woman. According to one critic, this novel offers a happier ending than any of Pym's with the recognition that "one's own life, even with its deeper longings unfulfilled, is happier than one had thought" (Fergus 132). Fergus's statement is true of Pym's own life and illustrates the author's conviction that women must always look at the lighter side of life while breaking through old habits and patterns that keep them from enjoying and appreciating themselves. Like most heroines of Pym's novels, Wilmet does not anticipate an exciting and romantic life, but is satisfied, instead, to celebrate the small quotidian pleasures that lead to acceptance and contentment.

CHAPTER III

THE NOVELS OF FAY WELDON

Female Friends, one of Weldon's early novels, provides a good starting point for a discussion of her novels that fit into the structural pattern of recognition => rebellion => victory because it illustrates the lives of several women who suffer at the hands of their men and thereby exposes the perfidy of sexual relations for many modern women. It also focuses on an equally important theme: the importance of female solidarity. Having herself become a writer when the women's movement was gaining in momentum and influence, Weldon was able to take in the rapid changes she observed in society and to note in her fiction the ways in which sisterhood could function to help women improve not only their gender relations, but how it could teach women to rely on one another for support. Indeed, she perceived this reliance as necessary if women are to make gains against a repressive patriarchal system. Seeing women as related in their roles as sisters, mothers, daughters, and wives, Weldon looked to the new age as a time when women no longer had to view other females as competitors and rivals, nor to remain passive victims in marriages that subjugated and denigrated them. The key, she believes, is in showing women how to obtain power in their lives, while still retaining those qualities that offer them fulfillment and satisfaction.

Since Weldon sees it as "in women's interests to change the way the world is" because society is "weighted very heavily against women" (*Novelists in Interview* 312), she created in *Female Friends* a number of women related by blood and friendship, who

play out many of the destructive scenarios Weldon observed in families everywhere. Intertwining the lives of three female friends, their mothers, children, and men, Weldon offers some alternate options by novel's end that hint at the possibility for happier, more independent women. Since it is not easy for women to break patterns which have dominated their culture for centuries, Weldon dramatizes the difficulties and the failures that are bound to happen during periods of great emotional upheaval and transition as well as the victories that come at the end of struggle for change.

Although set in contemporary Britain (1974), *Female Friends* covers roughly a thirty-year period, revealed in flashbacks as it weaves through the present and pasts of Marjorie, Grace, and Chloe, three women who were brought together during the evacuation of London in the 1940 blitz. The girls had met in Ulden, the home of Grace, when Marjorie, Chloe, and her mother had arrived by train together. While Marjorie went to live with Grace's parents, Edwin and Esther Songford at the Poplars, a comfortable, middle-class home, Chloe's mother, Gwyneth, a destitute widow, had taken a job at a local pub. Chloe, least prominent on the class scale during childhood, is at the center of the novel, and although an omniscient, third-person narrator tells part of the story, Chloe narrates a great deal of it in first person as well. Her role is the central one in the novel because she is the character who most needs to break out of an abusive marriage (and her own submissive nature) with the help of her female friends. In addition, all three friends are to learn the benefits of female solidarity by the novel's close.

The story opens with one of Chloe's frequent present-tense addresses to the reader, in which she ruminates on the two words her mother had preached since Chloe's childhood, two words that have shaped her adult self: "Understand and forgive" (5). Chloe has spent her entire life practicing her mother's advice even though she sees how such a philosophy led to poverty, loneliness, neglect, and

an early death for her mother. For Chloe, the continual effort of understanding and forgiving has left her "quite exhausted" (5). "I could do with some anger to energize me, and bring me back to life again," Chloe declares, as she turns her attention to her female friends, of whom she says, "I have been understanding and forgiving my friends, my female friends, for as long as I can remember" (5). With these thoughts and an inchoate desire to stop being exhausted by her friends and loved ones, Chloe drifts off to sleep as the novel reverts to the third-person narrator, who relates the next morning of Chloe's domestic life with Oliver, her husband, Françoise, the *au pair* from France whom Oliver has hired and with whom he is sleeping, and Chloe's five children, one belonging to her and her husband, and the other four children of Patrick Bates (one by Chloe, one by Grace, and two by Patrick's dead wife, Midge). Despite all these biological and "spiritual" children, things run quietly for Oliver, who has breakfast brought on a tray each morning with fresh bread he insists Chloe bake each morning. He supports Chloe and the children by writing film scripts for major American film companies, although his goal in life is to publish successful novels. Fiery and passionate in his early career, Oliver is now a greying and diminished man who "rules at home and nowhere else" (6). He is the kind of Weldon man, according to Martin Amis, "who will awaken you, then break your heart and very possibly your back too" (566).

Because Oliver is petulant and particular, he dictates every decision about the running of the house. Chloe is not allowed any machinery in the kitchen except a refrigerator (essential to chilling his champagne) because domestic machinery to him is a symbol of the bourgeoise life he dreads. Therefore, she must wash the dishes by hand as well as clean the floors on her hands and knees, and she must cook his food over wood and coal, not by electricity. It has been easier for Chloe after years of arguing to capitulate to his

demands because she knows that to some degree Oliver is right: "that hands break down less frequently than dishwashers or clothes washers; that deep-freezers spoil the flavour of food and denature it; that vacuum cleaners damage the valuable rugs; that it is immoral to employ other women to do one's own dirty work. . ." (102). Yet Oliver never stoops to this back-breaking work himself.

One technique Weldon uses in *Female Friends*, *Remember Me* , *Praxis*, and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* is to give plenty of detail about the characters' childhoods so that their actions are plausible and clearly motivated. In *Female Friends*, however, the characters' childhoods are so necessary to understanding the character as to be at the heart of the story. Therefore when the narrator states that even after years of scrubbing the floors and cooking the family meals, Chloe still regards the house as Oliver's, the flashbacks into her childhood reveal why she feels as she does. Having grown up in a small room off the pub and inn where her mother worked, Chloe is now plagued by the notion that she has no real entitlement to anything. To keep her feeling this way, Oliver exerts control over everything in her life: the color of the spare-room wallpaper, the books on the shelves, the newspapers delivered each day, the food in the cupboard, and the money in her pocket. At one period in her marriage when Chloe had been allowed to work, Oliver had forced her to use her entire salary for the upkeep of the house. Failing to make ends meet on her meager wages, Chloe finally had begged for more money from her financially well-off husband, only to be told, "'For God's sake, Chloe, stop nagging. I've got to get up at eight tomorrow in order to get half way across London so I can prostitute my soul from nine-thirty to five-thirty in order to keep you. If wasn't married I wouldn't dream of doing it, I can tell you" (137). So Chloe had curbed her tongue and gone on "polishing, patching, darning. . . " (137-38).

Oliver's sexual rondelets with Françoise, the cook, come as no

surprise to Chloe, who has endured years of his infidelity, all the while forcing herself to live by her mother's advice: understand and forgive. For years, his unfaithfulness had crushed Chloe, who lay awake at night, wondering whose bed he was in, whether it might be a whore, the maid, or a young and smart person they both knew. She had agonized, "How can I preserve my dignity before my friends, how can I smile and look serene at the parties you take me to, knowing what I know, and what they know? That you prefer anything in the world to me?" (163). Then Oliver chastises Chloe for her bourgeois attitude with, "'These other women mean nothing. You're my wife. . . . For God's sake. . . go out and have a good time yourself. I don't mind'" (163). But Chloe knows: "He lies in his teeth" (164). Chloe has been kicked out of the bedroom presumably because of her snoring, but deep inside Oliver is resentful that she has not given him more children, although Chloe, who "would have a dozen children if I could" (152), has been through numerous miscarriages and is guilty in Oliver's sight of "relinquishing the children of his loins into nothingness again, as if from spite" (161).

Trying to convince Chloe his creativity demands a nightly dinner of fresh young female flesh, he brings clap home and gives it to her. However, Chloe, who is determined to be patient through his wanderings, shoulders the disgrace with distress, but no anger, telling herself, "If I love him . . . I'll let him do what he wants, and a jealous wife is an abomination; and listening to herself, believes herself. Not for nothing is she her mother's daughter" (172). When he comes to her for sex now, he "drives himself and her into the most elaborate and curious of positions, and still she merely smiles, and obliges, and if in the morning she's bruised and bitten, isn't that love and didn't she enjoy it?" (172) Now with Françoise in the house for nine months and in his bed for the past three months, he once again flaunts the fact in front of Chloe and the oldest child, even

though he tells his wife, "'If you mind about Françoise, you know you only have to say'" (8). But since, as the narrator states on the second page of the novel, "This is the day Chloe's life is to change. . . through some alteration of attitude rather than conduct" (6), Chloe, who has started to change already, remarks, "'Of course I don't mind'" as she removes one of Françoise's dark hairs from the pillow (8).

A little background is helpful here to explain why Chloe has endured years of intentional cruelty and victimization while married to Oliver. Her mother's admonition to understand and forgive had indeed been more than empty platitudes; they were the dicta by which Gwyneth had lived. She had lost both her mother and her father early and had lived with her nan and made top of class in Home Economics until she fell in love with and married David Evans, a handsome, young miner. Early in the marriage, Gwyneth had given birth to Chloe, but David, who had spent so many years in the pit, had contracted TB and died, leaving Gwyneth alone and unsupported. In a flashback of the war period, the young mother learns of the job in Ulden and moves into the tiny room off the Rose and Crown pub, where she works from early morning to late at night serving dinner and beer, scrubbing tables, cleaning vomit, and washing water closets. When the Leacocks learn Gwyneth is a good cook, they ask her to give up her lunch break in order to cook lunch for customers. When they discover she can keep books, they ask her to stay up after closing to balance accounts, never offering a raise. Of Gwyneth's alacrity and determination, the narrator bewails, "How is Gwyneth to know that the platitudes she offers, culled as they are from dubious sources, magazines, preachers and sentimental drinkers, and often flatly contradicting the truths of her own experience, are usually false and occasionally dangerous?" (40).

Over the next twenty years, Gwyneth continues to slave for the Leacocks, helping to build the Rose and Crown into a larger and more successful establishment, so that it must hire other servants, girls

who make double what Gwyneth makes. Rather than complain, she tries to take pride in the lowness of her wages, remarking with awe, "'Only four pounds a week. . . . They wouldn't get anyone for that now'" (167). Even though Oliver and Chloe are able to buy her a cottage close to the Rose and Crown, and try to persuade her to retire, Gwyneth retorts, "'I mean to work until I drop'" (168). Having given up her youth and beauty for the Leacocks and having settled into "a tolerable pattern of exploitation and excitement mixed" (86), Gwyneth feels she has no alternatives. She cannot leave because she would not know what to do with herself, and she cannot ask for more money or a shorter working week because Mrs. Leacock will suspect something, or so Mr. Leacock warns Gwyneth. Sounding much like the chorus in a Sophoclean tragedy, the intrusive, mournful narrator concludes, "Thus, lonely women do live, making the best of what they cannot help: reading significance into casual words: seeing love in calculated lust: seeing lust in innocent words; hoping where there is no hope. And so they grow old in expectation and illusion . . ." (87).

Gwyneth's expectation and long-suffering are never rewarded, for she learns from one of the waiters that the Leacocks have sold the Rose and Crown to a large chain of hotels without telling her. By now Mr. Leacock is sixty and his wife fifty-five. Rather than feel betrayed and embittered, Gwyneth realizes she should have seen it coming and furthermore, they did not owe her, a mere employee, an explanation. The Leacock's behavior becomes more difficult for Gwyneth to defend in the coming month when the they leave for Wales, leaving her to learn that the new management plans to replace her with a younger woman. Calling the Leacocks monsters, Chloe storms at her mother, "'They've exploited you for years. . . . They've conned you and laughed at you, and you asked for it. You've stood around all your life waiting to be trampled on. Can't you even be angry? Can't you hate them?'" (171). The dramatic irony is heavy

here since it is quite obvious that Chloe is truly her mother's daughter, having endured from Oliver the same exploitation for twenty years of marriage that Gwyneth has suffered in twenty years of employment at the Leacocks. Unable to enjoy her retirement or the cottage Chloe and Oliver have provided for her, Gwyneth is soon discovered to have cancer all over her body.

Weldon gives the mothers' stories in *Female Friends* nearly as much detail as she does their daughters' in order to make the point that if women are to move forward on the road toward independence, equality, and happiness, they must not fall into the same patterns or repeat the same mistakes their mothers made. Given Chloe's fine exhortation to her mother to stand up for herself, one might wonder why she has failed to stop Oliver's trampling on her. Marjorie, who has observed the years of abuse Chloe has suffered from her husband, scoffs at her, "'You're like your mother. . . . You put up with too much. Endurance is a disease, and you caught it from her'" (70). Chloe endures Oliver not only because of her mother's example, but because she is incapable of supporting the children on any salary she might earn. In school with Marjorie and Grace, she had made excellent grades, coming in second after Marjorie. After her public education, she had received a grant to attend the university, but once she got involved with Oliver, her goals had become less clear. She had quickly given up the idea of her own education in order to spend more time with Oliver and had become pregnant within three months. The Chancellor had written asking her to leave the university since it appeared she was not benefitting from the course of instruction.

Because Oliver is so demanding and because she has lost sight of her desire for autonomy and enrichment, Chloe is never able to finish her education. To help make ends meet, she obtains a job as a counter assistant in the British Home Stores, and being as diligent and hard working as her mother, she is soon offered a promotion to

assistant manager, a position she declines because it would involve working an extra half-hour a day and arriving home later than Oliver. She believes she needs to be home before Oliver in order to fix his tea and warm up the room to ease his cough. On another occasion and in a different job, Oliver once again imposes his petulant will on his wife, asking her to request a leave of absence so that she can stay home, listen to him read his novel, and help him balance the sentences. She does so and loses another job.

At one point, Chloe surreptitiously writes her own novel, and "in all secrecy and diffidence" (142) sends it off unsolicited to a publishing house, who accepts the novel with moderate enthusiasm, only to be told upon letting Oliver read her manuscript that he forbids its publication because it is too autobiographical. Never mind that his last film, about the fragile sensibilities of a man sexually betrayed by his wife, has been considered by many as a comment on Oliver and Chloe and has not been commercially successful. Oliver, who had been tardy in reading Chloe's novel, manages to halt publication of the book by paying £1,500 in recompense to the publishers. Therefore, Chloe feels morally responsible for Oliver's financial anxieties and gives up fighting for her own job or career.

If this were the only story line in *Female Friends*, it would be tempting to call the novel just another tale about some nasty man victimizing his faithful and long-suffering wife. But Chloe, whose consciousness Weldon intends to raise with the help of her female friends by novel's end, is a willing victim in her situation. The problem is that Weldon sees all too clearly that one's friends often fail to offer the kind of support and constructive encouragement one needs. Weldon sees the women's movement as having eased up the competition and rivalry among women and concedes that as women achieve power outside of their sexual relationships and absorb the

concept of sisterhood, they will become mutual supporters and allies. However, the author also shows in *Female Friends* how easy it is for women to become so wrapped up in their own difficulties and problems that they do not invest the time or energy to help friends.

Being tied up with their own lives, Marjorie, Grace, and Chloe retain the *habit* of friendship, so to speak, although their mutual support and loyalty have been less than unconditional at times. Being vastly different in tastes, values, and lifestyles, they nevertheless remain friends because of the shared bond of growing up together. Being raised by Esther Songford, as the figurative mother of both Marjorie and Chloe and the blood mother of Grace, all three girls suffered isolation, deprivation, and unhappiness in varying amounts during the war. Their bond had not come easily because of the natural competition for attention, affection, and recognition under the roof of Esther, who tried to do her best for the girls in spite of her cruel and abusive husband. Marjorie and Chloe especially feel the transitory nature of happiness and security early on, having been denied proper homes during the upheaval of the war. Marjorie had lived with her mother and father in London until the war began, after which her father, a Jew, had joined the service and left. Her mother had sent her to Ulden alone on a train in the way many children were shipped out to avoid the danger of bombing, and she had been the last child selected by the town's residents, the strongest boys and the most domestic-looking girls having been chosen first. Chloe had arrived on the same train with her mother, the newly-widowed Gwyneth, but because her mother had been unable to spend much time with her daughter, Chloe had sought out the Songford family and spent all her time there. A spotlessly clean, well-behaved and well-mannered child, Chloe was welcomed by the Songfords because of the good influence she seemed to exert over their willful and spoiled child, Grace.

One of the reasons Chloe, Grace, and Marjorie can sympathize with each other in spite of their differences is their knowledge that other has suffered, not only during childhood, but into adulthood. Each woman has been victimized by family members, employers, and by the men in her life. Marjorie, for instance, the unattractive girl who had tried so hard to please, has a longing for her absent mother from which neither Chloe nor Grace can dissuade her, even though her mother deserves neither loyalty nor love. Helen, the beautiful and meticulous wife of Dick, had always resented her daughter Marjorie because she, Helen, had learned that her husband had been in the arms of another woman while she was giving birth to the child. Inwardly furious but outwardly serene, Helen and Dick waged a silent war during Marjorie's first ten years. Impotent against Helen's undeclared rage, Dick is sorry for his daughter but feels unable to help her. For his part, he concludes, "He can fight Hitler, Helen he cannot fight" (25). Therefore, he joins the army without first consulting his wife and leaves for the service the next day. As for Helen, "she simply cannot think what she did, during all those lovely laughing years of childless marriage, to deserve Marjorie. Who is plain and fawns, and at whose birth she lost her husband" (25). Once he leaves home, Dick never returns, and although Marjorie writes him long, loving letters, he does not respond.

Later with the Songfords, Marjorie craves the attention and love of her mother but rarely hears from her. When Helen finally visits Ulden, Marjorie notices how beautiful and timeless she is, how she flirts with Edwin and presses Esther's hand, and how she swoops through the house embracing everyone in the household, while barely hugging her own daughter. Even though all the other evacuees have returned to London, Helen exacts a promise from Edwin and Esther to keep her child while she patriotically performs her war duties. When Marjorie protests, Helen scolds her with "'please don't look gift horses in the mouth'" (59). Off she goes again as quickly as she

had arrived in her chauffeured car with her purest silk stockings and lace undergarments, promising to send a guinea a week, even though it is difficult for her. This type of quick, sweeping visit with little attention and no affection is the only contact Marjorie has with her mother for the remainder of Helen's life. It inspires in Marjorie an irrational love and craving which no other human can satisfy and makes her a willing victim of insensitivity and indifference.

Nevertheless in an effort to please her mother and attempt to "buy" her love in the only way she knows how, Marjorie becomes an excellent student, well-behaved, hard-working and neat, taking top honors throughout her years in Ulden. As the adult Chloe thinks back on their childhood, she sighs, "Who'd have thought it, when we were young, and starting life together, that Marjorie could ever have taken charge, would ever have stopped crying, fawning, placating. . . . Let alone earned £6,000 a year" (11). And so Marjorie, the pear-shaped child with frizzy hair, had battled "rejection after rejection, too honest ever to pretend they were not happening" (11). Chloe feels sorry for her friend because even though Marjorie has become a successful producer for the BBC, she lives without love in her adult life, as she had as a child, and has no children or family to sustain her. She boasts of not having cried for twenty-five years, a fact which saddens Chloe and brings the observation, "Along with Marjorie's tearducts, it seems, the rest of her dried up too. Womb, skin, bosom, mind. She shriveled before our eyes. . . . obliged by fate to live like a man, taking her sexual pleasures if and when she finds them, her own existence, perforce, sufficient to itself" (11).

In spite of this sympathy, theirs is an uneasy friendship at times because they can be cruel and brutally honest to one another in the way sisters sometimes are. At one time all three friends had vied for the affection of the notorious Patrick Bates, but they had gotten past that. Even though the temperamental artist has been to bed

with all three women and fathered children with Chloe and Grace and is still loved by Marjorie, he somehow exists on the periphery of their lives. Needless to say, Oliver cannot understand how the women have remained friends over the years and becomes resentful when Chloe tells him in the first scene of the novel that she will not be home to proofread his work that day because she is going to London to see her friends. When Oliver asks her why she chooses "'such odd friends'" (8), Chloe responds, "'One doesn't choose friends. One acquires them. They are as much duty as pleasure'" (8). However, when Oliver retorts that she does not even like them, Chloe agrees, that she "sometimes dislikes Marjorie, and sometimes Grace, and sometimes both at once" (8). But she sees that as beside the point in a friendship.

Chloe's statement that friends are as much duty as pleasure is at the heart of this and several other Weldon novels, illustrating the author's belief that women will not break out of their victimization until they learn to be faithful to other women. Given the oppression and chaos Weldon observes in women's lives, she endues her characters with the same problems and disappointments and rivalries that have kept women in the past either too busy, too tired, too worried, too overcome, or too petty from uniting to help one another. In fact, one of the things Weldon does not shy away from is to dramatize just how horribly females sometimes treat other females. Spiteful and neglectful as Marjorie and Chloe may be at times, however, they are no match for the cruelty and selfishness of Grace, one of Weldon's memorable femme fatales. Even so, Weldon is careful in her novels to give enough background to help show how or why women are the way they are. Learning the details about Helen's life, though they are not central to the novel, helps the reader to understand why Marjorie considers herself "'a walking Black Hole'" (45), flying through the universe in a great vacuum left by her mother. The same applies to Chloe, whose conditioning by her

mother to understand and forgive and whose life clearly personified the axiom, explains to a great extent why she allows Oliver to abuse her for so long.

Similarly, the role of Grace in *Female Friends* functions to dramatize the egocentricity and barbarity of a type of woman who has little regard for others, a woman who has no desire to earn her own keep, raise her own children, or embrace the concept of sisterhood. Once again, Weldon looks into her character's past in order to illustrate what factors have made her into the seeming monster she is, free will aside. Not surprisingly, the reader learns of a child who had been spoiled and coddled, yet one who had had her position as only child usurped and the attention and affection she had been receiving dispersed to two other girls were were not even family members. In addition, she had been raped by her father and terribly abused by her husband.

Grace first comes into the novel in a flashback as the narrator explains how the Songford family had suddenly grown from three to five members: Grace goes with her father to the train station to pick up a child, one whom her mother hopes will help in her flower garden. However, once the train arrives, the flurry of activity leaves only one small and unappealing child remaining, and even though she is the only one left, Marjorie is the first choice of Grace because she is "the child most likely to depress her mother and irritate her father" (32). Regarding Grace's questionable choice of evacuee, the narrator suggests that, "Perhaps Grace did not choose Marjorie from spite, but because she perceived a child who expressed outwardly what she herself felt inwardly, and she wanted to help" (32). And while the narrator is speculating on Grace's motives, she adds that "perhaps it was not cupboard love which drove Chloe to choose The Poplars as her second home, and Esther as a second mother, and Grace and Marjorie as her friends, but her

recognition of their grief, and their inner homelessness" (32-33).

While Marjorie soon proves herself "a better daughter to Esther than Grace" by making beds, complimenting the cooking, running Edwin's baths, bringing Esther wild flowers and burying her head in Esther's lap, Grace disowns her parents, whom she sees fawning on Marjorie, "the cuckoo in her nest" (34). Instead of making her bed, she makes trouble. Unable and unwilling to compete with Marjorie for attention, she develops her artistic qualities, which are good enough to help her get out of the scrapes she gets into because of her bad behavior. Edwin and Esther welcome Chloe into the household because as a quiet, polite, deferential, and clean child, she somehow acts as a kind of helpful catalyst to Grace and Marjorie.

Another item which helps to explain Grace's eccentric behavior is the fact that her father had raped her when she was fifteen during one of his drunken rages. Having taken off his belt to beat her, she claims his pants fell off and then he had forced her onto the bed. Recalling her childhood to Chloe, however, she is not quite sure her father ever accomplished the task and hints that perhaps the event involved a bit of imagination. She had nevertheless used the experience to elicit sympathy from Patrick and Marjorie. Perhaps this close call had affected Grace after all. She becomes promiscuous after her mother dies in childbirth when Grace is seventeen, abandoning her newborn brother and leaving Ulden forever.

As Chloe points out, Grace enjoys getting pregnant, but not being pregnant or having children. She has had numerous abortions, loving the anesthetics and feeling relief when the baby is gone. In fact, one of her attempted abortions had produced Stanhope, the child of Grace and Patrick that Chloe is raising. Grace had gone to the clinic four months pregnant with Patrick's child and had lied in order to get the procedure approved. But Chloe, having just had the miscarriage of a two-month fetus, had been distraught and had forced Oliver to rush

to the clinic and halt the operation. She had agreed to raise the baby if Grace would carry it to full term. And so it happens that Chloe and Oliver have another child to raise. Grace named the child Stanhope, then abdicated all parental authority to Chloe. When Chloe later chides her about the strange choice of names for the child, Grace hurls at her, "'I should have had an abortion. . . . Stanhope is your responsibility. Do you like my dress?'" (84)

Even though Marjorie makes acerbic comments about Grace's lack of maternal instincts, accusing her of disposing of fetuses with abandon, Chloe is more understanding and traces the fault to Grace's marriage to Christie, the tall South African land owner who had "battered the maternal instinct out of her" (152). Chloe remembers that Grace once loved her two children, Piers and Petra, and had "wailed like an animal for her stolen children" (152). Grace had taken the £200 her mother had provided upon her death and gone off at seventeen for her education and career, and had considered herself lucky to earn the love of Christie, "that year's Bachelor Catch" (120).

Even though all appears perfect on the surface, Weldon then explores the strains of marriage and motherhood on her character. Despite all the private nurses and convenience which money can buy and despite Grace's fierce devotion to her two children, making the transition from child-wife to mother is difficult. Grace becomes demanding to Christie because the baby is demanding on her. The natural tensions that come along with bearing and raising children bring out the worst in both parents, who revert to childish behavior themselves. The status-wife becomes "a messy cowering helpless thing" (130). While Grace helplessly implores, "Help me, look after me, cosset me. . . . LOOK AFTER ME, you bastard!" (130), Christie, "all vital executive energy and financial acumen" (52) becomes churlish himself: persnickety about food, drinking too much, throwing

tantrums, throwing the baby into the air, then failing to catch it. Two weeks after the second baby is born, Christie sweeps Grace off to the Bahamas because he needs a break from babies. During this trip, the roof of a half-finished pavilion he is building collapses, killing three people. After another similar incident, Grace finally realizes that her husband is cutting corners to make larger profits, a suspicion she blurts out at a party. From then on, Grace is not allowed to help with Christie's ledgers. As the tensions in the marriage and in Christie's business affairs mount, so does the temper of Christie, who finally resorts to violence at home.

One of the final blows to their wedded bliss comes twelve years into their marriage when Grace learns from her gynecologist that she too is supposed to be having orgasms during sex. This is news to both partners. Christie has always believed that the missionary position--with eyes closed--marks the limits of married conduct, "and anything else [is] the mere substance of pornography" (52). And Grace had never been told anything about sex by her mother. As Chloe once comments, she, Grace, and Marjorie "still cannot name our secret parts" even though "[t]hey rule us" (98). Therefore, when Grace hears this bit of information from her doctor and accomplishes the feat that night, she feels languid, replete, and gratified. The next morning, however, Christie accuses her of being an exhibitionist and slattern and questions why she is exposing her breasts in a certain dress. This new sense of power over Christie (having her own orgasm) encourages Grace to fight him for more autonomy while he at the same time becomes more overbearing and suspicious of his wife. Christie discovers he enjoys slapping and humiliating Grace during sex, finding as much pleasure in punishing her as in pleasing her, "Possibly more" (186).

Although Grace and Christie's marriage sounds like a soap opera, Weldon continues to fuel the fire, not because the details of their marriage are so bogus and bizarre but because they ring frightfully

true: wealthy man and beautiful wife stop at nothing to denigrate and destroy one another. Their debacle of a marriage finally comes to an end when Christie discovers Grace has been unfaithful to him with Patrick Bates, who is painting her portrait. After their divorce Christie marries Geraldine, the social worker on his case, so that she will recommend he receive custody of the two children. Needless, to say, Grace loses her children after a long investigation, funded by Christie, in which there is no shortage of evidence, both false and true. Knowing she is defeated, Grace tries to bear the loss of her children by hardening herself and convincing herself that her love can only damage them. Even after Christie's sudden death one day into his third marriage (he divorces Geraldine as soon as he receives custody), the children revert to the care of Geraldine, and Grace stays out of it; indeed, she does not even inquire as to the children's whereabouts because she has become desensitized by the experience. How easy, the narrator speculates with a touch of irony, to accuse Grace of being heartless, selfish, unmaternal, and unnatural.

Such are the sexual politics Weldon explores, and the bad behavior of Grace and Christie. Grace's role in the novel is important for several reasons. In one sense, she functions as the bad girl of the novel, a bizarre but realistic woman feared and hated by other women because she will steal the love of their men without a second thought. She steals Patrick Bates, the eccentric artist who is married to Midge, mother of his two children. In fact, as both women give birth to Patrick's children on the same night, Patrick remains with Grace, who would have aborted the child but for Chloe's persistence. While Patrick oscillates between Midge and Grace for years, Midge and the children go hungry--she is weak, and he refuses to pay for the support of his children and his wife because he is a pathological miser. However, Grace always manages

to have enough money to survive well--with a house to sell or a Rembrandt print to pawn. While most women fear poverty, deprivation, abandonment, separation, or death, "Grace fears the lack of a good hairdresser" (16). No doubt she has been trained to this end, speculates Chloe, but she was "a more than willing victim in the experiment" (16). By novel's end, she is becoming more capable of moral action, for after Midge commits suicide, Grace, who refuses to pity the luckless woman, nevertheless loses interest in Patrick. Also, it is Grace who first exposes Christie's crooked business practices. Grace is not presented as a diametrically opposite foil to Chloe, but as a woman who is capable of moral action and who needs the help and moral approbation of her female friends.

Chloe's alternate venom against Grace and defense of her old friend reveal Grace to be more than the naughty girl who adds titillation to the plot in her portrayal of seemingly pure female evil. Weldon shows how Grace is both victim and victimizer, but she is also careful to illustrate that most behaviors have antecedent conditions. Grace is no monster, but a selfish woman who has been shaped by her environment and her experiences. And since Weldon wants her characters to absorb the concept of sisterhood, Chloe and Marjorie, who never shun their friend for her bad behavior, learn that they must help her, that their shared bond makes Grace, as Chloe has earlier commented to Oliver, a duty as well as a pleasure. As the women look back over the messes of their lives, they see how they had washed their hands of moral obligation in order to maintain their loyalties to men. Françoise, a former psychology student looking for sexual liberation in England, tells Chloe that female friends are not to be trusted, and Chloe is inclined to agree:

> Marjorie, Grace and me.
> Fine citizens we make, fine sisters!
> Our loyalties are to men, not to each other.
> We marry murderers and think well of them. Marry

> thieves, and visit them in prison. We comfort generals, sleep with torturers, and not content with such passivity, torment the wives of married men, quite knowingly.
>
> Well, morality is for the rich, and always was. We women, we beggars, we scrubbers and dusters, we do the best we can for us and ours. We are divided amongst ourselves. We have to be, for survival's sake. (193-94).

What Weldon wants to accomplish with the novel, says D.A.N. Jones, is to make women see that "there is more female unity around than Chloe supposes" (215). Again and again over the course of the novel, Chloe defends the actions of her friends and her own actions, maintaining that "'Women live by necessity, not choice" (70), and "'You can't hold men responsible for their actions'" (207). For this reason she plays the role of Oliver's passive victim, exhorting herself all along to understand and forgive. However, one of the lessons she learns after years of abuse is that understanding and forgiving must have limits if one is to live a sane life. Women's worst enemy is not Grace or someone like her, but their own complicity in their victimization and their refusal to reach out for help.

Because the friends in the novel have never truly learned to depend upon one another, each woman in the group develops a defense mechanism that allows her to cope with her unhappiness or her victimization. Grace and Marjorie find relatively safe and sane avenues of coping. Marjorie, for instance, handles her problems by getting ill with palpitations, stomach cramps, or slipped discs. Then she snaps out of her anxiety and depression by writing another memo or getting another job. Life continues. Grace takes direct action: she throws out an offending lover, has hysterics, tears up her house, makes obscene phone calls, then calms down after a manicure. Life continues.

While both Marjorie and Grace attempt to take positive action to

alleviate their bad situations, Chloe places herself more in the tradition of her own mother and Esther Songford, a mainstream position of action and reaction: "Rub and scrub distress away, hands in soap-suds, scooping out the sink waste, wiping infants' noses, the neck bowed beneath the yoke of unnecessary domestic drudgery. . . . Life continues" (114). However, one of the things the women in the novel discover is that life does not go on and certainly does not advance in the woman's favor unless she is willing to take a stand. Midge, for instance, commits suicide because she cannot bear to watch her children starve and her husband ignore her. Marjorie and Chloe fail to take a stand, fail to persuade Midge to take her matter to the courts, fail to prevail on Grace to stop having the affair with Patrick. Later, they must share the blame, "'We just stood back and let her die'" (221). Taking a stand, they learn, involves responsible moral action. Marjorie informs Chloe, "'We should interfere more in each other's lives, and not just pick up pieces'" (220).

Although Marjorie, Grace, and Chloe may deserve some blame in the case of Midge, they must nevertheless learn not to blame themselves for everything that goes wrong, as some Weldon victims are apt to do. This attitude, strongly reinforced by their men, only adds to their feeling of helplessness. While it is true that Midge clearly needed help and that action on her behalf might have saved her, the women in the novel must learn to draw the distinction between when to take action and responsibility and when to hold back their feelings of guilt and responsibility. For instance, Chloe believes that if she had not prevented Grace's abortion, then Patrick would not have been with Grace on the night Midge's child was born; as a result Midge might not have killed herself. Perhaps, but then Stanhope would not be alive now either. At one point Chloe considers the guilt they have taken on as women: "Marjorie, Grace and me. How foolishly we loved, and how murderous we are" (18).

She recounts the number of children, abortions, and miscarriages among them. Grace somehow feels responsible for killing Christie, who had died in a car accident during his third marriage. Marjorie feels responsible for killing Ben, the man she lived with and loved during her university days. Changing a light bulb, he had stretched to reach the bulb Marjorie held out and had fallen and broken two vertebra. It was her fault too when she lost his child at six months. "As for me," Chloe mourns, "I killed my mother, sending her into the hospital to have a hysterectomy she never really wanted" (19). Also, even though Chloe would love to leave Oliver, she feels guilty because of the children. How can she carve through these patterns of dependency and hope, she asks herself, "in the interests of something so impractical and elusive as personal happiness?" (155). As the narrator notes of Chloe, "She throws away her happiness in handfuls, this girl" (126).

However, since the first scene of the novel had promised a change in Chloe's life and since Weldon's structural paradigm suggests a rebellion and a victory, so it happens, if only tentatively at first. When Chloe announces she is going to London for the day and Oliver attempts to dissuade her, she nevertheless defies him and goes. While in London, her two friends give her a terrible time about putting up with the affair between Oliver and Françoise, begging her to leave him. When Chloe protests, Grace, who accuses Chloe of being "'a poor cowardly timorous thing," like her mother, insists that Chloe is pushing Françoise on her husband, adding that "'It was you who killed my mother. You wore her out'" (98). Such is the relationship between the three old friends, alternately perceptive and helpful, then insulting and unfair. Marjorie is no easier on Chloe than is Grace. In her deadpan, half-serious way, she offers to help Chloe get some pills to get rid of Françoise. When Chloe insists she is perfectly happy, that she does not suffer from sexual jealousy, and that people should take their sexual pleasures how and when

they want, Marjorie hears the echo of Oliver's sick rationality, and reminds Chloe that it is Oliver and Françoise who are getting the sexual pleasure, not Chloe. Even though each woman sees mirrored in her friends her own inadequacies and lack of self-esteem, each nevertheless pushes the other toward a healthier response to problems. Part of what the three friends learn is that they should interfere more, take action to help one another when they see things going awry in their friends' lives. Even Grace emphasizes, "'If you're going to be someone's friend, you have to intrude your friendship sometimes'" (207). Marjorie comes to the same conclusion, stressing the importance not just of sympathy, but of action when necessary. She tells Chloe, "'I should go and shoot Oliver, and you should commit Grace to an insane asylum, and as for me, you should have got me to a marriage bureau a long time ago'" (220). Fortunately, the truths they begin to assimilate are not learned in a vacuum, for Marjorie soon has a chance to help Chloe find the courage to leave Oliver.

Chloe returns from her trip to London, determined to do whatever she must to maintain family peace at dinner. However, Oliver's intent to punish Chloe makes a debacle of the occasion, ending with his tirade at his wife: "'Sitting here at my table when you're not even wanted any more. You have no place here. You don't even do the cooking. You embarrass everyone, hanging on the way you do . . . .You murderess. You aborter of my children'" (178). However, once Oliver has had his say and sent Chloe to the bedroom in tears, he attempts to make up to her with soothing words, "You must have more confidence in my love for you. . . . If I savage you with words, it is because you are an extension of me, and I say to you the things I feel like saying to myself. . . .You try and inflict a pattern of conventional married behaviour upon me which is alien to my nature. You want me to be nice. I'm not nice'" (195). Chloe's only response is to

apologize.

In a surprising turn of events that echoes Grace's accusations of Chloe, Oliver tries to make love to his wife:

Oliver I'm sorry I made you cry. Put your arms around me.

Chloe What about Françoise?

Oliver Bother Françoise--

Chloe But you can't just--

Oliver I can, you know.

Chloe Poor Françoise, out in the cold--. (196)

This half-tempting, half-testing of Oliver to continue his relationship with Françoise shows both the inchoate rebellion in Chloe with her need to bring things to a climax regarding Françoise. It also reveals her distaste for a man far beyond forgiving. As Sara Blackburn comments, Chloe prides herself on her orderly, martyred existence, but "The rest of the time she is searching for a way out of it" (18). Desperate as her action is, it shows Chloe's need to begin bringing their relationship to a close. Oliver disengages himself, telling Chloe that if she wants Françoise, she shall have her and invites her into the room for a *ménage à trois*, orchestrating both women's placement and action until his direction falls flat and silent. At this point he strokes his wife's forehead, then accuses her of not caring for him or any man: "'Your true response is to women. To your Grace, or your Marjorie, or your mother. The maid, even. Well, why not? There is nothing wrong with being a lesbian, except that the degree of your hypocrisy has been damaging to me. All these years. . . blaming me for all our failures, throwing away our children'" (199).

The stunned Chloe finally reaches the stage of recognition and rebellion that comes at some point in most of Weldon's novels. Her response to her husband is "'You are quite ridiculous. I don't care what you say, any more, or what you do'" (199). Her sincerity takes him aback as he realizes he is looking at a clear-headed and

determined wife, who is now "her own woman again" (200). Then he goes through with intercourse with Françoise while Chloe watches "with as much dispassion as she watches her children bathe themselves" (200). When the occasion is over and Oliver has sent a tearful Françoise back to her room, Chloe finds herself laughing, "quite lightly and merrily. . . not with Oliver, but at him, and in this she is, at last, in tune with the rest of the universe" (200). "Her victory is complete" (205), notes the narrator, even though Chloe does not enjoy it much. She is still financially bound to a man who derives pleasure from humiliating her.

However, a call from Marjorie that morning quickly changes the lives of Marjorie and Chloe, for Helen is dying of cancer in the hospital. She dies, leaving her large house in London to her daughter, which Marjorie in turn offers to Chloe, telling her she can lease out the upper floor to pay for expenses. Her action clearly illustrates the point Weldon wants her women to learn, that female friends can and must help one another through positive action as well as emotional support, that simply picking up the pieces after a disaster is silent, immoral complicity. Her generous gift enables Chloe to move her brood to a new home, where it is assumed under Chloe's loving care, all will thrive, even if in somewhat reduced financial circumstances. Chloe's rebellion against Oliver is not enough alone to give her a victory or to offer independence or freedom, for she knows the courts would never be sympathetic towards her in a divorce after it were revealed that Oliver has been paying for the upkeep of four children who are not his. But Marjorie's offer allows Chloe to emerge from her rebellion as a victor. She promptly leaves her astounded husband, who begs, "'But you can't leave me with Françoise,'" to which Chloe's internal response is, "I can, I can, and I do" (237). Supported by her friends, Chloe finally rejects her mother's lesson to understand and forgive at all costs. What a

despairing message to leave with daughters, she concludes, as she ponders her life: "What progress can there be, from generation to generation, if daughters do as mothers do?. . . Better to end like Helen, unforgiving and unforgiven. Better to live like Grace, at least alive" (233).

Weldon, who enjoys having her narrator or first person character intrude, interrupt, or interpret throughout her novels, gives Chloe the opportunity to comment upon the meaning of her narrative: "Marjorie, Grace and me. What can we tell you to help you, we three sisters, walking wounded that we are?" (235). She questions the fact that anyone actually learns lessons from others, for "Female bodies lie strewn across the battle-field" (236). But if one is willing to hear, she offers advice to readers to listen carefully to elder sisters and grand mothers; to be grateful for the good times because no sooner do they come, than they are gone; to rejoice in moments of beauty, glimpses of truth, and nights of love. Ultimately, the message is a positive one. Change is possible and necessary.

The novel ends here, giving a brief recount of the situations of the three friends after Chloe's decision to leave Oliver. All three women illustrate a kind of victory, the most each can muster considering her circumstances and her past. Grace discovers she is pregnant again and decides to keep the baby. As the narrator notes, "Grace does a soft-shoe shuffle amongst the bodies of the fallen, and keeps the vultures off a little while" (236). She moves in with Sebastian, a young producer, who she swears is Hypatia's father, and captures to some degree the happiness she once had with Christie. Her life having been for the most part one long rebellion, except for a brief time with Christie, she actually settles down, makes cucumber sandwiches for Stanhope once a month and visits her father once a week.

Marjorie, brokenhearted over the loss of her unresponsive, cruel

mother, whose denial of love had shaped her daughter into a loveless woman, grieves for her mother, then decides she is actually more her father's child than Helen's. This decision is liberating, for it gives Marjorie the courage to move to the battle-field of Israel where she and her camera crew court death each day as they travel the cease-fire zone, looking for violation incidents. Without her womb and her mother, the narrator notes, she seems cheerful enough: "She is brown, weather beaten, and handsome at last, in a country where to be devoid of juices is not remarkable, and to be alive, male or female, is commendable" (237).

Chloe, who narrates the last section of the novel, looks forward to a future in which "I no longer wait to die. I put my house, Marjorie's house, in order, and not before time" (237). One suspects that the friends will not forget the lessons learned during the course of the novel. Small as they may seem, the gifts they offer one another provide the physical and emotional support necessary to sustain and nurture. One assumes Chloe will help Grace with her new baby when and if another dark time comes, and Grace will continue to analyze, nag, confront, and insult the other friends when one strays into a dangerous area or attempts to backslide into self-pity or a destructive relationship. Marjorie will offer her honesty, financial support, and strength. Patchwork as their lives may appear, together they stand a much greater chance of maintaining their victories than if each had to face the world alone. Stumble and fall, these heroines will, as they have in the past, but their female support system will help act as a buffer between them and the chaos of the world.

Remember Me, Weldon's 1976 novel, has a great deal in common with her earlier works, all of which have to do with women who are victimized by men and by other women and who must learn to absorb

the lessons of the women's movement. In fact, says Joyce Carol Oates, because of the popularity and over-use of the subject of the oppressed wife, Margot becomes one of "the great Women's Liberation cliches of the decade" (54). The novel concerns multiple female characters whose lives intertwine, much in the manner of *Female Friends*; however, this one contains more animosity among characters. Although the women in *Female Friends* had led rather exciting lives--Marjorie with her important BBC career, Grace with her wealth, beauty, and nomadic ways, and Chloe with her lovely clothes and film-writer husband--the women in *Remember Me* are ordinary housewives or ex-wives. They have no careers nor any prospect for work, having devoted themselves to being full-time wives and mothers. Like the former novel, this one includes an intricate chronology, complex events, and fully-rendered characters amidst the shuffling of wives and/or children due to divorce or adultery. Since the female characters have not yet absorbed the idea of sisterhood, they all have something to learn by novel's end.

Although both narratives share many similarities, *Remember Me* is distinctive because it contains the element of the supernatural. Ostensibly the plot involves the vengeance of Madeleine, a discarded wife, against her former husband and his new wife of three years, Lily. Madeleine, who has never been able to forgive Jarvis, her former husband, and Lily for falling in love and betraying her, refuses to get a job as the novel opens, and lives off the alimony supplied by divorce decree, which had been rushed through the courts before the passing of the Married Women's Property Act. Poor, divorced, and depressed, Madeleine lives in a squalor that announces to the world her victimization, helps her to feel vindicated, and causes embarrassment for Jarvis and his current wife. Having custody of her one child by Jarvis, she and Hilary wallow in their dank misery, Madeleine smoking too much and Hilary eating herself to huge proportions with Sugar Puffs. The time-frame of the novel

actually involves only a few days, from the death of Madeleine through her funeral. The supernatural motif begins with Madeleine's death as she manages to exert more force and influence in death than she had in life. Madeleine mysteriously inspires others to act after her death, awakening in them "a sense of human solidarity" (Krouse 16). In death, says Krouse, she becomes "a powerful motivating force for re-examination, recognition, change, and growth in others" (16).

Even though this plot thread provides the impetus for action over the period of several days, the narrator weaves back and forth through past and present to introduce characters, family histories, and antecedent events that affect the story. Margot, like Chloe in *Female Friends*, is at the center of the story although the lives of the other female characters are also important in their own right. By allowing the main characters to introduce themselves and comment upon their circumstances and attitudes, Weldon gives readers direct access to what the protagonists are feeling. Therefore, though their lives may appear satisfactory on the outside, on the inside, the characters' sense of victimization and indignation is growing. Margot, for instance, appears to have a comfortable and serene life as a doctor's wife and mother of two healthy children, but on the inside she is dissatisfied.

Margot introduces herself first: "Oh, I am the doctor's wife, waking. I am Margot--housewife, mother waking to the world I have made, a warm and homely place in which others grow, if not myself. How nice!" (3). The reader discovers in Margot a latent sorrow and anxiety: "Am I in mourning for myself, lost somewhere long ago, drowned in a sea of other people's demands, a family's expectations?" (3). Margot is in some ways like Chloe in that she is a loving mother to her children and passive wife who always puts her husband's needs first. Philip is a doctor whose office is

attached to the side of their home. His wife sees that things run smoothly in both his practice and at home, where she prepares fresh meat pies for her family and wears the same sensible seersucker robe year in and year out. She shares another similarity with Chloe in that she refuses to admit her mistreatment by her husband. Instead, she rationalizes and scrubs and keeps herself too busy with domestic drudgery to be able to question her position in the family hierarchy. With "her past unacknowledged, her future unquestioned, making herself useful, as women do" (4), Margot plows through the tedium of life without complaint. Her husband is not openly abusive in the way that Oliver was to Chloe, nor do he and their children consciously victimize Margot, but their quiet expectations of family peace, submission, order, nurturing, and a warm dinner leave her feeling unappreciated and invisible. Used to self-sacrifice and denial, both Chloe and Margot have a difficult time breaking out of old patterns that seem to have held the family together but have provided little spiritual nourishment or validation for the wives. As for happiness, echoing Chloe in the earlier novel, "Margot can't remember ever feeling she had a right to it" (193).

Meanwhile Madeleine laments in her basement flat, "Oh, I am Madeleine, the first wife. I am the victim" (13). Being betrayed by her husband and the much younger Lily is the source of Madeleine's continual bile. She had lived with Jarvis and Hilary in a large old home "a place of safety, the suitable background to their lives, workaday and practical" (42), until Jarvis had brought the pregnant Lily home and installed her in the guest bedroom. Soon thereafter the marriage broke up since Lily had no intention of leaving. Once they force Madeleine out, Lily, a fortune hunter attracted to the prestigious old home and Jarvis's position as an architect, spends enormous sums of money refurbishing the home and giving lavish dinner parties. During the three years since her divorce from Jarvis, Madeleine has been controlled by a hatred and desire for revenge

upon Jarvis, Lily, and their two-year old son. She admits that the only thing that would give her peace is to waylay, attack, and mutilate Jarvis, and to burn down his home with Lily and Jonathan in it. Her strongest desire is to force Jarvis to acknowledge the wrong he has done to her and to love her again. Lily too introduces herself as the architect's wife, no longer the lowly butcher's daughter:

> It was my mother, Ida, on her wild Australasian shore, who taught me how to care so well for possessions, both material and human, there being so little of either about. How pleasant everything is since I became the architect's wife. All things around me ordained, considered, under control. . . . How happy we are--like children. Surely nothing can go wrong? (24)

Things do go wrong, of course. The beautiful, young, and desirable Lily who had edged Madeleine out of her own home has a lesson to learn, which is that there are consequences for one's actions and that she should learn compassion and empathy. One of Lily's problems is that she likes everything to be beautiful and perfect, like herself. Not only has she achieved perfection in her home, which is now according to Madeleine, "a monument of sickly self-esteem" (42), she has done so with her husband and son, or so it seems to her. Jonathan has learned to climb into his own high chair and to sit quietly while Lily prepares toast. Receiving great disapproval when he cries or makes a fuss and little affection otherwise, Jonathan has learned how to keep the peace, just as Jarvis has.

The wicked step-mother also attempts to control Hilary, the child of Jarvis and Madeleine, whom she and Jarvis keep on weekends, but Hilary wails, "I am Hilary. I am the daughter of two houses, at home in neither" (74). Hilary is fourteen and weighs 154 pounds. With large feet and larger bust, Hilary copes with the misery of her unhappy life--being the product of an indifferent

father and a vindictive mother--by living on sweets. Even though Madeleine lacks the energy to stop Hilary from self-destructing, Lily intends to succeed. When Hilary comes for weekends, she eats low-fat food with the rest of the family. Not surprisingly, Lily's attitude toward Hilary is mean-spirited and condescending. The truest victim and casualty in the story, Hilary silently cries out to her mother, "Mother do you hear me? I need your help. I am growing stunted, I know I am. If you don't do something soon, I'll fall apart. . . . Mother, do you hear?" (75).

And mother does, says the narrator, as Madeleine drives home from another disappointing affair with a strange man she has met through Dial-A-Date. The supernatural element of the novel that just begins to hint at itself here provides not only a great deal of humor, but also begins to affect other characters, allowing Margot, for instance, the browbeaten wife, to learn self-assertion and to break out of the victimization by her family. It is also helps Lily to develop compassion and empathy so that she will not victimize her family in her arrogant quest for perfection, control, and status. In the end, even Madeleine rests in peace in one of the happiest conclusions of a Weldon novel. All the major characters achieve some degree of victory after their struggles, and even their family members revel in their powers of adjustment and reconciliation. This novel, like *Female Friends*, follows the structural pattern of recognition => rebellion => victory. Madeleine is in a state of rebellion during the entire novel and achieves her victory only after accomplishing her goals in death. Margot, the second victim in the novel, finally recognizes and admits her victimization shortly after the story begins, rebels against it, and through Madeleine's supernatural influence, achieves a victory at home by forcing her family to recognize her and to yield some authority to her.

The events that help to effect these marvelous changes in the

characters begin on the first day when Madeleine discovers Lily has removed Hilary from school to take her to the hairdresser. Hurling herself into the house that was once hers, she finds not Lily, but Margot instead, the part-time bookkeeper for Jarvis. The two share a moment of complicity and distaste over Lily's surreptitious kidnapping of Hilary under the pretext of a dental appointment. Margot feels sympathy for the jilted Madeleine because of her own sense of guilt. She had made love to Jarvis once at this house when he was only twenty-nine and she was a young nursing student. At the time, he was married to Madeleine, but he had coaxed the loveless young Margot upstairs and into bed for a few moments of bliss, promising, "'Don't worry. I'll only put it in a little way'" (159). Even though Madeleine had come into the dark room and could not recognize the woman in bed with her husband, she had recognized her husband and silently left the room. Her marriage had deteriorated from that moment. Margot later regretted the incident because Jarvis had been drinking and appeared not to remember it, a fact which insulted the already unprepossessing Margot. Now, fifteen years later, Margot, who works part-time for Jarvis, remembers every detail with guilt and humiliation. She also regrets the incident because she and Philip, who had been dating and had split up, made up later that same night and made love to seal their union. Either Jarvis or Philip had planted the seed for her first child that night. Therefore, Margot, the ignored woman, who assumes her first child is Philip's because she wants so much for it to be true, feels secret delight and complicity in Madeleine's verbal attacks on Jarvis, Lily, and Jonathan. The upshot of their conversation is that Madeleine demands of Margot, "'If anything happens to me, I don't want them to have Hilary. I'd like you to take her'" (45). Margot is startled, but does not take the conversation seriously at the time. Even though the sense of complicity soon evaporates, Margot realizes, "Some connection has been made, some fragile cogs have

interlinked" (48).

That very night as Lily serves a sumptuous feast to Philip and Margot, Jarvis is thinking about the situation with Madeleine. Having heard from Lily that his ex-wife had been in their home shrieking accusations and threats, he silently sides with Lily: "Madeleine and Hilary have to be sacrificed; Jarvis has no choice. But why won't they lie down decently and gladly, as other sacrificial victims do?" (83). About this same time, as Hilary sends her silent plea to her mother for help, Madeleine's car careens off the road following a blowout, sheering off her right leg, then impaling her chest with the steering column. Madeleine's last thoughts are about Hilary and the guilt she feels about ignoring Hilary's needs while spending all her energy on hatred and vengeance. Recognizing the costs of such hate to both mother and daughter, Madeleine asks, "What have I done to Hilary?" (84). Determined that her daughter will never live with Lily, she dies.

Suddenly, miles away at Lily's dinner party, Margot feels cold. The wind blows wildly through the open window; Margot screams and falls to the floor with a terrible pain in her leg. Pulling herself up to lean against the sofa, she slaps at her right leg and bangs her fist to her chest. Her husband, the doctor, merely looks bemused and assumes it is some sort of hysteria to get attention. "'Don't be more of a fool than you can help'" (85), he warns his wife as he drags her to her feet and takes her home. The next morning, her family cannot understand her sudden resentment and change in attitude. From then on, Margot's soliloquies become more insistent and harsh. She quickly progresses from the victimization of "Oh, I am the doctor's wife. . . I am used, put up with, ignored" (93) to shrewd observations about her husband: "I don't really like him at all, let alone love him" (105). This is the point at which Margot's rebellion begins. Over the course of the next few days, through the medium of the dead

Madeleine, Margot begins to absorb the energy and anger of Madeleine, becoming more assertive and less agreeable. Needless to say, she has no idea that she is transforming herself to a new being who is neither the old Margot nor Madeleine, but Madeleine/Margot, a woman capable of motherly love and compassion, one who will also fight for her rights as well as for power in her own home.

The dead Madeleine remembers seeing Margot under the coats during the brief affair with Jarvis and, calling her a bitch and hypocrite, charges, "I remember you now. Beneath the coats with Jarvis. It was you. You owe me something. Look after Hilary now" (139). And so Margot limps around the next few days with a pain in her chest, worrying about the fate of Hilary. Reeling and gasping in what Philip tells her is psychosomatic pain, Madeleine/Margot phones Lily, screeching in her hoarse voice, "'You filthy murdering bitch. You stole Jarvis. You shan't have Hilary too'" (165). Later that night Margot/Madeleine stalks to her room, accusing Philip of being a devil: "This devil I'm married to. He used up my youth, saps my strength, exploits my good nature; he uses me as a servant, whore, and punching bag for his ill-humor'" (167). Pinching her husband awake, she tells him sharply, "'I want us to have Hilary here'" (167). Philip simply tells her to stop acting like a mad woman, then goes back to sleep.

Meanwhile, it is Jarvis's job to identify the body of his ex-wife, and at this point the fun begins with Madeleine's deadly high jinks. The undertakers keep noticing that the shrouds, which are used to cover the dead woman, continuously drift to the floor and have to be replaced. Each time one of the men looks at Madeleine or moves her body, her eyes open. When she is wheeled out for identification, her eyes fly open again, and she appears to be alive still, and as Jarvis notes sadly, she appears "on the point of saying something nice" (145). He touches her skin, only to find it warm for a moment before he realizes that his hands are cold. He remembers the good times

and the bad, but admits he prefers her safely dead; nevertheless, he is shocked and saddened and regrets his part in her death. As the dead woman's plans for Hilary's resettlement gradually fall into place, the narrator notes how, "It is as if Madeleine's body, so little regarded in life, has in death become the focal point of some kind of group energy, some social concentration, some common search for consensus, of the kind which sends our communities lurching in one direction or another towards their gradual betterment" (147). Jarvis, for instance, decides Madeleine is to have a grand and well-peopled funeral, for which he will pay out of Lily's carpet fund, in contrast to Lily's desire to abandon the body and refuse to let Hilary attend whatever service might be held.

Horrified over the strange phone call, which had been in a voice Lily does not recognize, the superstitious second wife knows the call holds for her a portentous message. Quite suddenly, Jonathan develops a fever, and Lily, feeling the stress of mother love for the first time, becomes an overprotective, hysterical nuisance, calling the doctor numerous times, who declares the baby perfectly healthy. In a new development, Jonathan, who somehow senses Madeleine's ill will in Margot, will have nothing to do with Margot and screams if she is present. Then he develops a blister on his foot. His mother has it checked, only to be accused of being an overanxious. She is sure his life is threatened. While these worries consume Lily, Madeleine is being transported to the undertaker's office. Something strange happens en route when a cyclist swerves under the hearse's wheel, causing another wreck and spilling Madeleine's body onto the pavement. Her eyes fly open again. At the same time, "Something happens!" (189) and Lily removes Jonathan's bandage to discover, not a neat blister, but a big round sore threatening to cover his whole heel. As Madeleine wreaks her obstreperous revenge on Jarvis and his family, "Her dull eyes glitter in light reflected from God knows

where" (199).

But Madeleine's vengeance has not played itself out yet. Moping around the house, noticing things that remind him of Madeleine, Jarvis finally admits the terrible demands made on him by his house and his new wife, whom he had considered his "lucky ticket in the lottery of life" (5). Now, Jarvis must finally admit what he had only suspected before: that morally, Madeleine was more refined and sensitive than Jarvis and that Lily is conventional, trivial, selfish, unmaternal, and manipulative (56). Peering into the mirror, he thinks he sees Madeleine, but it is Margot who actually enters the room, with the aura of his ex-wife. Margot makes love to Jarvis again, then in a vindictive tirade that comes from both Margot and Madeleine, reminds the architect that he had once made love to Margot, that he had had no right to use her that way, then dismiss her. For Madeleine's part, she shrieks, "'You took away my life, my home, and gave them to Lily. Now you want to destroy my child as well'" (205). To a stunned Jarvis, who has no idea what Margot is talking about, the Madeleine voice threatens, "Oh, Jarvis. I am Madeleine. Give me permission to hate you. Approve of my malice. Acknowledge I was right and you were wrong. Then I'll be quiet" (205). Margot promptly becomes herself again and expresses concern for Hilary, but Jarvis, who feels nothing for Hilary, nevertheless refuses to release her. Margot finally admits that Hilary is half-sister to her oldest son, Laurence, and pleads to take Hilary in. Before the matter can be resolved, Lily rushes in with news that Jonathan must go to the hospital because he has blood poisoning.

The pace of events picks up as Weldon works toward edification and resolution. Margot returns home with the full force of Madeleine's fury seething within her. She turns on her children for their self-interest and indifference, shocking them into awareness and concern. When Philip enters, he sends them up to their rooms as

she unleashes sixteen years of pent-up anger. The cool dispassionate doctor takes a verbal lashing from Margot, who is so angry that she goes mad for a few moments. To punish her husband for years of indifference, condescension, and bullying, she tells him she never loved him and that she married him only because she was pregnant. When he calmly answers with, "'I loved you'" (223), she thrusts back, "'And your deigning to love me is supposed to compensate for a lifetime of servitude? What a con it all is. I love you; you wash my socks'" (223). Margot bites her own hand to stop her attack, but she is helpless against Madeleine's determination to have it all out. She tells Philip that Laurence is Jarvis's son, then screams, "'I hate this home, this prison. I hate you'" (223), going after Philip's throat. Restraining her, Philip, now cries in desperation, "'Margot. . . you are not Madeleine. You are my wife. Madeleine is dead. This is some kind of hysteria. . . . '" (224), and finally he gives the consent both Margot and Madeleine wait to hear, "'if having Hilary here means so much to you, by all means, go ahead'" (224). His wife's grasp loosens and she returns to herself again as the children creep down and feel happy that their mother has returned to her normal state. They agree to make whatever adjustments are necessary to accommodate Hilary, and a sense of equilibrium and peace returns to their home.

Then a dizzying number of events quickly take place and coalesce into a satisfying denouement. Lily, who has been frantic over Jonathan's illness, somehow perceives it as Madeleine's doing. Thinking back over her earlier life, she admits her selfishness and lack of concern for her own mother and her sister, who had died during childhood. She empathizes now with the pain and suffering of all mothers. Jarvis too finally must admit, "'We none of us behaved very well,' . . . Madeleine, I'm sorry" (217). Limited as Jarvis is, he at least reestablishes his ability to feel. The experience has also

brought about a transformation and a new awareness in Lily: "To have a husband is nothing. To be a wife is nothing. Sex is an idle pastime. To be a mother is all that counts. . . . Jonathan, little Jonathan, don't die" (219). Suddenly, as if released from his illness, the toddler who has learned to climb into his own high chair and sit quietly while his mother prepares toast, perceives the change in his mother and learns that "it is better to protest than to endure" (226). He lets out a wail and at such a volume that the people down the street hear him. The doctor declares him healthy, and the family loads into the car to go home.

Relieved about Jonathan, Hilary tells her father about the invitation to stay with Philip and Margot, and he acquiesces. Lily, who is dazed by this stroke of good fortune, promises to make the spare room over according to Hilary's tastes for her weekend visits. After all, she concedes, "'it's your house as well as mine. You were there before I ever was'" (227). Lily, "Stepping back, chastened, making room. Understanding what she's done," becomes a better person, one who has acquired compassion and empathy during her ordeal with her son. In spite of the fact that Jarvis's financial circumstances have been reduced over the years, Lily insists on refurbishing Hilary's new room, dropping her former plans to carpet the stairs and repair the roof. In fact, she decides to make the roof repairs herself because, "'I want it to be nice for Hilary at weekends'" (227-28). When Margot turns in her notice, Lily decides to do Margot's tasks herself, realizing and accepting at last that Jarvis's talents are diminishing, as is his health, and their prospects will not improve; she accepts him for what he is.

Madeleine's revenge is complete, and everyone, it seems, is set free. Hilary declares she will never eat Sugar Puffs again as she comfortably settles in to Margot's family. Her mother's death, the precocious child realizes, "was her best and final gift" (230). Margot, however, has one further recognition. She notices one day

how similar Hilary's hands are to her son's. While she had begun to accept the fact that Laurence was Jarvis's son, she now must realize that Laurence is indeed Philip's son, but that Hilary is also his daughter, not Jarvis's. When Margot had been off in the coats with Jarvis, Philip had come looking for her, and he and Madeleine had comforted each other after seeing the other two together. In fact, Madeleine had conceived Philip's child, Hilary, that night. Sounding like the newly-discovered aristocratic father claiming his long-lost heir in a Fielding novel, the doctor accepts Hilary as his child and welcomes her into her rightful home. Therefore, Madeleine's mad revenge turns out in fact to have more than a little perspicacity.

As for Margot, once the funeral takes place and Madeleine's specter disappears from her life, she wonders how much of Madeleine remains in her. She believes she still retains in her voice "the resonance that came with Madeleine's death" (232). Settling into her home once again and into the role of nurturer, she acknowledges her sisterly bond with Madeleine:

> I am Margot the doctor's wife, no longer young. I shall be happier now that I have acknowledged grief, and loss, and the damage done to me by time, and other people, and events--and the damage that I did. . . . I am Margot and Madeleine in one, and always was. She was my sister, after all, and she was right: her child was mine; and mine was hers. (232)

Even the vengeful ex-wife rests in peace after settling the last of her affairs on earth. Although she is dead, the authorial voice cannot help commenting on her unfettered fury and the damage it has done:

> Be quiet, Madeleine. Lie still. So you were wronged; so were a million, million others, dead and gone or on their way. . . . You had your patch of blue sky, your glimmer of sun, the awareness of your body as it took its nourishment, reproduced itself, and was finally destroyed. That's all there

> is to any of it. Acknowledge your mortality. Lie still, say your goodbyes and go. (100-01)

The passage sounds much like the closing statement of Chloe in *Female Friends*, who reminds readers of the transitory nature of life and of happiness. Given that fact, Weldon exhorts readers to treat one another more sympathetically. The narrator also must prompt the dead Madeleine about her hatred against Lily, questioning, "Was it really her fault? People do the best they can and only steal what they have to. Husbands, lovers, children" (138). In the same way that the narrator can look forgivingly and compassionately back on Grace's misdeeds in *Female Friends*, she can do the same with Lily, pointing out how her lowly childhood as a butcher's daughter had inspired in her the desire for something greater. As Madeleine finally gives up the ghost, so to speak, she finds forgiveness for her former nemesis: "Lucky Lily--thinks what remains of Madeleine, without envy and without regret. Lucky Lily. You are my sister too. Keep your child. Just don't keep mine. Good night, goodbye" (227).

As a result of Madeleine's haunting visitation, the characters in *Remember Me*, like those in *Female Friends*, learn to break out of their victimization, learn the limits and consequences of rebellion and vengeance, and learn to absorb the concept of sisterhood, which means learning to forgive offending females and then letting go of anger and hostility. As a consequence, Margot is happier, Lily is happier, Hilary is happier, even the dead Madeleine is happier. With the theme of reconciliation throughout and the motif of humor, Weldon brings the narrative to a mirthful, but thoughtful, conclusion. The sadness of the events in the story and the lives of the characters is balanced by Weldon's ability to blend "the terrible and the ridiculous" (*Contemporary Authors* 422). Asked once how she can write so humorously in the face of suffering and disappointment

she observes throughout the world, Weldon replied, "there's just not much fun left, and I reckon mirth, which is free, safe and shared, is just about all we have for our consolation" ("Towards a Humourous View of the Universe" 311).

Like *Remember Me*, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* is a playful novel, but its humor is much darker, its effects more chilling. Both novels also have a female heroine who has been betrayed and abandoned by her man and is bent on revenge. Although Madeleine does take her revenge on Jarvis, in the end all turns out well and a sense of equilibrium prevails. However, in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, the ending is gloomy and suggests a sense of doom even though Ruth, as the purveyor of revenge, achieves every goal she had set for herself: she transforms herself into a beautiful, desirable, rich, and powerful woman; she destroys the woman who stole her husband; and she reclaims the love of her husband while reducing him to a state of groveling helplessness. In this way, the novel strictly adheres to Weldon's paradigm, recognition => rebellion => victory. However, the ending is so ambiguous as to suggest that Ruth's victory is meaningless. Reaching far beyond the boundaries of rationality and proportion in her quest for vengeance, Ruth becomes victor in an ending as controversial as it is provocative.

Even though *She-Devil* and *Remember Me* are revenge fantasies in which the protagonists cannot forgive or let go of their sense of indignation and injustice, in Ruth's story, Weldon takes up the plight of unattractive women in a world that seems to value beauty above all else in women. The novel revolves around Ruth, mother of two and ugly duckling wife of Bobbo, a handsome and successful accountant. Ruth loves and values her husband because at six feet, two inches tall with jutting jaw, sunken eyes, hooked nose, broad and fleshy hips, she has always felt obtrusive, unappreciated, and unloved. Even her mother had difficulty loving her because "ugly and

discordant things revolted her" (8). Ruth had looked like her father, who had left long ago, but her half-sisters, who took after their pretty mother, had "married well, and disappeared, no doubt into contentment, bathed in the glow of the world's admiration" (8).

Ruth had not been Bobbo's choice for a wife. He had married her when he contracted hepatitis and his parents refused to support him any longer. She had been staying at Bobbo's parents' home helping out with the upkeep of their house and their rent when Bobbo had come home and found her staying in his room. Having just been rejected by a woman, he had found Ruth "warm and soft and broad and the sofa . . . cold and hard and narrow" (32). After a lifetime of feeling unattractive and undesirable, Ruth was glad to have someone to love. When she became pregnant, Bobbo's parents pushed him into marriage to get him out of their house.

Once they marry, however, Ruth becomes a paragon of wifely efficiency and domestic duty. Even Bobbo's mother finds Ruth a remarkable wife and mother, cooing "'How lucky Bobbo is!'" (14) as she notices the ironed, folded shirts in the laundry, the clean picture windows, and the general spotlessness and organization of the house. Bobbo fails to appreciate his wife's efforts and feels cheated because his wife's unattractiveness, the boredom of suburban life, and the greater excitement in the arms of other women than at home. Doubtless, part of Bobbo's boredom rests in the fact that he had been forced into marriage with a woman he finds embarrassing. Both he and Ruth agree she would be a liability if his "smart new clients" (11) were to see her. Therefore, she remains at home, a slave to her husband and family, attempting to fulfill herself in the only avenue left to her: housewifery. Bobbo, on the other hand, fulfills himself through his job and declares their marriage "open."

Ruth, in fact, feels triply victimized--by a husband who does not appreciate her, by a society that devalues her because of her

physical ungainliness, and by God for creating a world that rewards some women with desirability and good looks while leaving others bereft of attractive qualities. As the novel opens, Ruth is furious because she knows her husband is having an affair with a small, "pretty and delicately formed" (20) woman. Angry that she has been denied access to love by her looks, Ruth grieves that her nature and her looks do not coincide. "I was unlucky," she says, "in the great lottery that is woman's life" (5). Bitterly, she contemplates the fate of unattractive women:

> And how, especially, do ugly women survive, those whom the world pities? The dogs, as they call us. I'll tell you; they live as I do, outfacing truth, hardening the skin against perpetual humiliation, until it's as tough and cold as a crocodile's. And we wait for old age to equalize all things. We make good old women. (7)

What she would like, she admits, is "to be part of that other erotic world, of choice and desire and lust" (25). But since both she and Bobbo see her body as being at fault, she realizes he will never be reconciled to its enormity or her role as his wife.

Therefore, one of the main issues of the novel, according to Sybil Steinberg, is "the unequal distribution of beauty and sexual charisma" (PW Interview 84) and Weldon's expression through Ruth of a well-known but rarely articulated fact: "the envy of unattractive women of their attractive sisters" (84). Inherent in the novel also, states Jeanne Dubino, is the idea that inside every fat woman is a small woman waiting to get out (115). Ruth finds herself "jealous of every little, pretty woman who ever lived and looked up since the world began" (LL 25), and rather than grieve for that which she cannot obtain, she decides instead to "sing in praise of hate, and all its attendant energy" (LL 3). Her destructive song dramatizes the envy and longing these women like Ruth feel, but fails to offer any easy solutions. Weldon sees the need that women

feel to be attractive and desirable as part of the function of being female. In the Steinberg interview, she states that "all the in-between things ugly women do, all of their successes of one kind or another, are only compensations for the admiration of men. . . . But what you still want is this odd thing, which is men looking at you in the street" (PW Interview 84). While Weldon derides the fact that "to be a sexual turn-on is the only thing of value in this culture," she admits we are "stuck with it" (84). Therefore, in her portrayal of the unattractive and therefore unloved Ruth, Weldon indicts "not only the male establishment's standards of beauty and feminine worthiness, but also women's own willingness (perhaps eagerness) to subscribe to these standards, sometimes at great sacrifice, discomfort and even pain" (83).

Weldon herself describes the first half of *She-Devil* as "an exercise in feminist thought" (84). In the early portion of the book, she sets up the marital situation of Ruth and Bobbo, gives a little family history on both partners, and establishes the fact of Bobbo's infidelity with Mary Fisher, the beautiful, successful, and rich writer of romance novels who lives in a high tower next to the sea. As the novel begins, Ruth is aware of her husband's disloyalty and has already recognized her state of victimization. She opens the novel with her song of hate: "Mary Fisher lives in a High Tower, on the edge of the sea: she writes a great deal about the nature of love. She tells lies. . . . Mary Fisher is loved by my husband, who is her accountant. I love my husband and I hate Mary Fisher" (2). This hate obsesses Ruth, who puts up with Bobbo's open marriage because she feels she has no other options. She had never finished her education and therefore has poor potential as a wage earner for herself and her two children. Also, she loves Bobbo and realizes how difficult it will be for her to find love again, given her large and unpleasing exterior. Therefore, she has endured twelve years of humiliation and

infidelity and has no expectation for improvement in her situation. Having been physically rejected all her life, she has learned to believe she deserves little, even though as a natural function of being human she craves love, respect, and validation to the point that she concludes that it is "Better to hate" and "to sing a hymn to the death of love than to grieve" (3).

Ruth and Bobbo live on Nightbird Drive in a suburb with thousands of similar houses to the north, west, and south. "We are in the middle, exactly in the middle, of a place called Eden Grove. A suburb. Neither town nor country: intermediate. Green, leafy, prosperous, and some say, beautiful. I grant you it is a better place to live than a street in downtown Bombay" (4). The very title of the suburb is ironical, for even though the place is prosperous and friendly, its inhabitants are bound by middle-class conformity and convention. When husbands stray, as does Bobbo, wives must look the other way and keep their self-esteem by telling themselves comforting lies about how lucky they are. Sometimes, Ruth admits, however, even lies cannot protect them, and "They are found hanging in the garage, or cold and overdosed in the marital bed. Love has killed them, murderous in its own death throes, flailing, and biting and poisonous" (7). In Eden Grove, women strive for what little power they can get over the hearts and pockets of men, but Ruth laments, "It is all the power we can have, down here in Eden Grove, in paradise, and even that is denied me" (26). Like all the others, Ruth fights the daily tedium and fear by maintaining a well-run house and by involving herself in her children's lives. "This is happiness," she contends with grim irony, "the completeness of domestic, suburban life. It is what we should be happy with: our destiny. Out of the gutter of wild desire onto the smooth lawns of married love" (12).

The event which finally and irrevocably upsets the twelve-year marriage is a dinner for Bobbo's parents at their home. Ruth mows

the grass, cleans the house, feeds and cleans the children, then prepares a dinner of mushroom soup, chicken vol-au-vents, and chocolate mousse. Nervous over impressing Bobbo's parents and upset over Bobbo's affair with Mary Fisher, Ruth had dropped the chicken on the floor, which she quickly retrieved because Bobbo would disapprove of the monetary waste if she threw it out. While his parents are settling themselves in for a delicious dinner, Ruth runs to the kitchen in tears, followed by Bobbo who asks why she is crying. When she indicates Mary Fisher as the cause, he demands incredulously whether she expected him never to love anyone again after he had married Ruth. She quickly replies, "'That is exactly what I expected. It is what everyone expects'" (21). With the issue unresolved, the dinner plans quickly unravel when Ruth drops the soup onto the floor and rushes upstairs sobbing.

At that moment Ruth begins the first of two rebellions that are to thrust her into action and change her life. She runs upstairs, reciting the Litany of the Good Wife, the first rule which states that for everyone's sake she must pretend to be happy when she is not. Going through the eight rules, all of which render the wife as conciliator and submissive servant of the husband, Ruth no longer finds the Litany soothing and declares, "I have fallen out of love with Bobbo! I ran upstairs, loving, weeping. I will run downstairs, unloving, not weeping" (27). Upstairs, conditions escalate when Bobbo declares himself fed up and announces he is leaving Ruth to move in with Mary Fisher:

> "You have worked terrible mischief here tonight! You have upset my parents, you have upset your children, and you have upset me. Even the animals were affected. I see you at last as you really are. You are a third-rate person. You are a bad mother, a worse wife, and a dreadful cook. In fact I don't think you are a woman at all. I think that what you are is a

she-devil!" (47)

Bobbo's words provide just the impetus Ruth needs to propel herself into full-scale rebellion. Deciding that she must be a she-devil after all, she begins to feel wonderful and exhilarated: "If you are a she-devil, the mind clears at once. The spirits rise. There is no shame, no guilt, no dreary striving to be good. There is only, in the end, what you *want*" (48). Ruth wavers and hesitates, then decides she wants four things:

> I want revenge.
>
> I want power.
>
> I want money.
>
> I want to be loved and not love in return. (49)

In full-scale rebellion, Ruth, who sees that nothing is impossible for she-devils, decides, "since I cannot change the world, I will change myself" (63). Telling her children that she has been "dumped" by Bobbo, she concludes, "'That's what happens to the plain and virtuous'" (53).

However, when Bobbo offers her $52.00 per week to run the house and feed the children when those things actually cost $165.00, Ruth must develop a plan of action. Bobbo tells her she will have to sell the house since "'Women and children don't consume nearly as much as men'" and besides, "it's time you went back to work.'" (54). His cruel treatment and financial abandonment of his wife and children at first dismay Ruth, but only increase her determination. It takes time to become a wholly she-devil, she concedes, because "The roots of self-reproach and good behavior tangle deep in the living flesh" (56). However, she summons the strength she needs for her rebellion when she goes into her garden barefooted and feels the power of the netherworld move up into her toes and up her calves and into her she-devil loins. Removing a few important items and sending the children off to MacDonalds, she starts the blaze by putting a lighted cigarette in Bobbo's study. As fire finally engulfs the house and

the house and burns it to the ground, Ruth exults, "The flames were wonderful. They warmed my chilly blood" (74). Ruth's activity is not just the result of blind fury. Burning the house and dumping the children on Bobbo are not last-ditch efforts at eliciting attention or sympathy or money, but the result of Ruth's thoughtful and methodical planning.

Since Bobbo is now living with Mary Fisher in the High Tower, it is to this house that Ruth takes her children. With her flair for romance, Mary had purchased the High Tower, an old lighthouse, five years earlier in a state of ruin and renovated it into a beautiful love bower that faces the sea. She and Bobbo live there in bliss, much like the heroines in the popular romantic novels she writes. Mary keeps a small staff of people--two maids, a cook, a gardener, and a security man-- to run the tower. Dobermans walk at the heels of Garcia, the man who guards the tower and who on occasion sleeps with Mary Fisher when she is distressed.

Another of Ruth's calculated plans after turning her children over to Bobbo and Mary is to break her marriage vows with the sixty-year old caretaker of the Eden Grove athletic field. The man, who is either visionary or partly-retarded and has a sixth sense about people, had been expecting Ruth and asks her why she wants him. Her answer is, "'This was the first step. . . . The breaking of the first rule'" (60). As she and Carver fulfill their mystical coupling, she sees the experience as having constructed "a criss-cross base on which the new foundations of her life would stand. . . . The webs were pain and pleasure, humiliation and exultation, transfiguration and degradation, properly accepted" (61). Ruth accepts these polar opposites, both the good and the bad, as the basis on which her future life will exist.

She meets another man, Geoffrey Tufton at the TraveLodge, a marketer of information technology, who will give Ruth some

confidence in herself and confirm her ability to achieve her goals. He is celebrating his fifty-first birthday alone and suffers from a stubborn conjunctivitis in one eye: it itches, weeps, and drizzles pus and seems impervious to healing. Like Ruth, the man is "unsightly, overweight, and useless" (90); therefore, he is curious when the "uneasy-looking giantess" (90) comes into the bar. Accepting a drink from him while perceiving his discomfort over his disabled eye, she offers a cure: he should rub it with gold. Then she demonstrates with her wedding ring, and the eye is immediately soothed. Ruth stays with him a week in his hotel, at the end of which time his eye is completely healed, and he feels elated and free that she has cured him of "a disease he never knew he had--that is, of loss of faith" (92). This early experience is important for two reasons, first, because it indicates a trend in Ruth's life that as she shuns dependency on men, she becomes more desirable to them in spite of her size and looks. Second, seeing the miracle she has worked in Geoffrey, she begins to perceive her special powers as a she-devil.

Empowered by her rage and hate, Ruth begins to heal inside, seeing herself as "a woman learning to be without her children" and "a snake shedding its skin" (88). She still has not revealed to the reader her ultimate of goal of transforming herself into the exact image of Mary Fisher through years of plastic surgery, then taking a ruined Bobbo back. Her immediate activities after her marital break-up are retributive, and while extreme, seem plausible. At the end of each episode, however, just when it seems a good time to let go of the rage and get on with a new life, Ruth begins another hellish plan that defies the traditional limits of vengeance and further delays the possibility of a return to equilibrium.

One of those plans is to engineer the return of old Mrs. Fisher to Mary's High Tower. Ruth knows about the novelist's indigent old mother because while Bobbo was Mary's accountant he had brought

home her books, and Ruth had poured over every detail after Bobbo went to sleep each night. Ruth, in fact, had learned a great deal about Mary Fisher that she could use against her. Old Mrs. Fisher had been installed in a house for the elderly, the bills for which Ruth has seen. Traveling to the home, Ruth wrangles a job out of Mrs. Trumper, the administrator, as a live-in domestic. While there, she quickly becomes a model of strength and efficiency in handling her duties. Replacing the patients' tranquilizers with vitamin tablets, she preaches to the residents that they have rights and should insist upon them.

Although Ruth's activities bring about positive effects on the residents of Restwood, her ulterior motive is to make Mary Fisher suffer over having abandoned her mother to the nursing home, much as Bobbo had abandoned Ruth and the kids. With Mrs. Fisher's quick improvement of mind and body, Ruth helps her write a letter to her daughter asking for a television and a room to herself. When Mary refuses the request because she is now supporting two children, Ruth makes plans to get Mrs. Fisher a day's pass to visit her daughter. Before the visit, she puts the Valium and Mogadon tablets back into Mrs. Fisher's medicine bottle so that she becomes incontinent, a fact she hides until after Mrs. Fisher's departure to Mary Fisher's High Tower.

Once Mrs. Fisher arrives, Mary can do little because there is no train out in the evening. When Mary calls Restwood to complain, Ruth takes the call as a senior member of the staff. She chastises Mary because Mrs. Fisher "'is a human being with full human rights, not a parcel, and can come and go as she wishes. Nor is she senile. She is wonderfully improved in health, lately'" (105). Mary Fisher refuses to argue on the phone because she realizes she has met an equal opponent on the other end. When Mrs. Trumper learns in Mrs. Fisher's absence that she has fouled her mattress, she refuses to allow the old woman to return. Ruth's goal is accomplished when

Mrs. Trumper calls Mary Fisher the next morning to state that under no circumstances can old Mrs. Fisher return to Restwood. Mary Fisher openly weeps when she learns that the only other homes that will take in her mother have a waiting list of five to ten years.

The next chapters cover similar episodes in Ruth's life in which she methodically, and often hilariously, carries out her plans for revenge. In each case, a strong sense of irony prevails, for while Ruth pursues her vengeance with the determination of a possessed woman, she nevertheless imparts compassion and hope to those she touches. As she had healed the man with the runny eye, so she improves the conditions of the nursing home while she is there, improving the physical conditions and morale of the residents. When her task is accomplished, she moves on. Everything Ruth does has the authentic, feminist ring of the consciousness-raising of a woman determined to drag herself up from oblivion and improve her lot in life, while in the end her purposes turn out to be at times the stuff of sickest revenge and self-promotion. However, although each task takes Ruth nearer her goal, each episode provides something of positive value for those she leaves behind. The process takes years and demands tremendous physical sacrifice from Ruth, but she is patient and clear-sighted in her goals, never wavering for a moment from her paths of retribution, self-improvement, and self-destruction. Rather than feel satisfied once she has resettled old Mrs. Fisher with her daughter in the High Tower, Ruth gleefully admits, "I've only just begun" (124).

It is clear by now that Ruth, the former victim, is now the victimizer, as she steadily plots and carries out the ruin of Mary and Bobbo. Alan Wilde discusses the way in which readers are likely to miss or misconstrue the novel's essential thrust and to find "with a sense of somewhat aggrieved surprise" that reader sympathies have been undermined, and a readjustment of the novel's ethical grid may

be necessary (412). While the reader has steadfastly sympathized with Ruth because of the unfairness of her plight and the utter cruelty of her husband, Mary Fisher now becomes a victim, and loyalties begin to shift. Ruth has dumped the children on her into a house that is too fine and fragile for youngsters, and out of guilt Bobbo has refused to discipline them or halt the tide of their destructiveness. Old Mrs. Fisher, who has now been sedated to render her less testy and troublesome for Mary, is now more incontinent and difficult to manage than ever. Still hating Mary for allowing Bobbo into the house, Garcia lets the Dobermans run loose and brings his pregnant girlfriend into the house to live. Further, Bobbo, now too busy and selfish to bother with the domestic anarchy, spends more time each week at the office, doing the books for the many wealthy clients Mary has brought him and seeing pretty blondes on the sly.

Mary, who had once written of the joys of love, now reconsiders the nature of love and sees that it is complicated. Rather than look out on the beauty of the cliffs and beaches, she now looks inward at the misery in her life. She is drowning, says Jeanne Dubino, "not in a sea of desire, but in a flood of domesticity" (111). She finds out, as Ruth knows, that love translates into domesticity for a woman. As a result, the hardships she endures affect the creativity and quality of her novels, and she settles into a rather conventional life because her champagne now gives Bobbo indigestion and tuna is cheaper than smoked salmon. The more unhappy her life becomes, however, the more she depends on Bobbo for approval, love, and temporary escape. She craves the brief moments of sexual bliss that he had provided so freely before and finds sexual thralldom "as tragic a condition in life as it is in literature" (111). But while Ruth is transforming herself into a she-devil as a defense mechanism in order to break out of her victimization and achieve success, Mary Fisher becomes mired in domestic chaos and responsibility. Mary learns through her

suffering that "unhappiness must follow happiness, misfortune good fortune. That to love is to be vulnerable to fate and to be vulnerable is to invite attack by fate" (151). Therefore, while hate transforms Ruth into a capable but worse person than she had been before, love transforms Mary into a better person, i.e., the conventional wife-martyr.

Even though Ruth learns of Mary's suffering and sacrifice for Bobbo and the children, she remains relentless, excusing her lack of remorse by the fact that she is no longer a woman, but a she-devil. Her next activities show her to be increasingly resourceful, inventive, and ruthless. She begins plans for a career. Although she has little formal education, she obtains two general education certificates, one in English and one in math, for fifty dollars each through an underground source. Creating the name of Vesta Rose for herself, she realizes she will have to start earning a living by doing jobs others prefer not to do. Therefore, she obtains a number of jobs in the coming years by looking after other people's children, caring for the insane, guarding imprisoned criminals, cleaning public rest rooms, laying out the dead, or making beds in cheap motels. All the while, she lives frugally and saves the money she makes, planning to use it for her master plan. Each job, however, is based on the calculation of the degree to which it will bring Ruth closer to her ultimate goal. With her new certificates, she manages to get a job as a prison officer at Lucas Hill Hospital, a prison for the criminally insane, because the staff who work here are unemployable elsewhere. Like Mrs. Trumper before her, the staff superintendent does not look closely at Ruth's past experience because she seems strong, capable, and clean.

This job is important to Ruth, for it introduces her to Nurse Hopkins, an unusual woman who loves working on the ETT, Emergency Tranquilizing Team and who proudly displays scars obtained from

hidden knives and gnashing teeth. She and Ruth eventually become roommates on the nurse's block and get along well, partly because both see themselves as freaks. Nurse Hopkins is under five feet tall and weighs two hundred pounds. The nurse is important also for the several hundred-thousand dollars she has had left to her by guilty parents, and although she is independently wealthy, she prefers to work at the hospital among people more peculiar than she. Her money later enables Ruth to open a highly successful employment agency.

During her stay at the prison, Ruth spends her spare time going to secretarial and bookkeeping classes in the city. Once she has mastered the techniques of double-entry accounting, she begins sneaking into Bobbo's office at night with the key she retained before the house fire, and tampers with the ledgers of his clients, moving sums from one ledger to another, and writing out checks from his business account into his and Ruth's inactive joint account. Having occasionally kept his bank statements earlier, Ruth does a little doctoring, then comes back the next week to continue her plan to make it look as though Bobbo is siphoning funds from his clients' accounts into his personal account. This process requires many clandestine visits to Bobbo's office. In the meantime, she has begun sleeping with Nurse Hopkins, who feels a tonic effect from the sexual activity--her menstrual cycle becomes regular and her eyes brighter as she sheds unwanted pounds.

Once Ruth has made the final entry in Bobbo's books and is ready to move to the next portion of her plan, she manipulates Nurse Hopkins into a move: "'Out there in the world,' [says] Ruth, 'everything is possible and exciting. We can be different women: we can tap our own energies and the energies of women like us. . . '" (137). Therefore, with the nurse's money, Ruth establishes the Vesta Rose Employment Agency at the far end of Park Avenue where shabby buildings and garbage bags out front mark the street.

Advertising with a Park Avenue address is helpful, and since the phone exchange is the same for both ends of the avenue, callers cannot tell whether they are speaking to the rich end or the sleazy end.

Actually, the idea for the agency is clever and inventive for its time, even though, as with other ventures, Ruth's chief purpose with it is to use it to her own private ends. The agency specializes in finding secretarial work for women (like Ruth) coming back into the labor market--either from choice or necessity. When a woman signs with the Vesta Rose Agency, she receives assertiveness training as well as training in secretarial skills. For convenience, the organized day-care facility, the shopping and delivery service, and the laundry and dry-cleaning service allow the women time to eat lunch rather than run their errands during their time off. These privileges are expensive, but well worth it for the harried women entering the work force. Nurse Hopkins runs the day-care facility on the top floor, administering tranquilizers to "the more obstreperous children" (139) while Ruth runs the agency.

Within a month, the books show a profit, and the women, who had shown up by the hundreds, feel grateful. Since the patience, responsibility, and hard work required of the mothers at home lends itself well to the womens' learning office work, it comes as no big surprise to Ruth, a shrewd observer of business practices and human nature, that her workers are soon in great demand by employers throughout the city. The agency even achieves a bit of fame, being held up as a success story and "an example to the weak-willed and complaining of what women could do if they really tried, if they hadn't been fortunate enough to marry well!" (139). Vesta Rose herself (Ruth) remains elusive, never appearing in person nor permitting herself to be photographed. Within six months, she places typists, secretaries, and bookkeepers all over the city.

During this time, Ruth's revenge is seen as a positive response to the injustice of the male establishment. However, after the hustle and bustle of daytime entrepreneurship, Ruth makes shadowy, evening transactions in Bobbo's bank account with the help of a woman at the bank who had gotten her job from the Vesta Rose Agency. One of the things Ruth depends on to accomplish her schemes is the loyalty of the Vesta Rose girls, who comprise what James Lasdun refers to as "a sort of underground feminist mafia" (63). Eight months into her venture Ruth finally gets a call from Bobbo's office asking for two qualified women. Ruth sends Elsie Flower, a small, pretty woman similar to Mary Fisher, who is talented at typing but bored with her husband. Soon Bobbo is making advances and Ruth encourages Elsie to follow her impulses. After a six or seven-week affair ensues and Elsie, at Ruth's behest, declares her love for Bobbo, he terminates her employment at once. The hurt and angry Elsie, who had thought sleeping with the boss would help get her "'a raise, or extra leave, or a promotion or something'" (146) discovers, "'You just get fired quicker'" (146). Therefore, Ruth advises Elsie to write Bobbo's lover about the affair since she believes Mary Fisher has the right to know what Bobbo is doing at work.

In addition, Ruth puts Elsie to work with her scheme to deposit money in Lucerne and Auckland. Under the new name of Olivia Honey, Elsie establishes bank accounts in Ruth's name with all the money she had siphoned off of Bobbo's clients' accounts, an amount of about two million dollars. With one of Ruth's major goals accomplished, that is, a huge source of income and the assurance of criminal charges against Bobbo, Ruth moves on. Profitable and worthy as it is, she leaves the agency to Nurse Hopkins and departs. The following week accountants move into Bobbo's office for the annual audit and call the police when they discover the tampering with accounts. It appears to the authorities that Bobbo has siphoned off

client funds, then sent Elsie abroad to set up his accounts while he prepares to desert his office and join her.

Bobbo begs Mary to save him from prison, so she sells three of her four houses in order to obtain the services of prestigious international lawyers from distant parts. She writes another book, but because she no longer believes in the lies she tells in her novels and as a result changes her usual style and content, the sales are sluggish and profits poor. Garcia, who now disdains her, begins to steal her expensive jewelry, and his insolent girlfriend sulks around the house, making Mary feel inferior because she has never had a baby and realizes now she never will. She even turns to religion to ease her misery and calls Father Ferguson to convert her to Catholicism in order that she be forgiven for the damage she has done to Bobbo's family. Happy in her new faith, Mary declares she will use her name, her fame, and her reputation to save the world in her next book, *The Pearly Gates of Love*, about a nun's struggle for heavenly love. The novel disappoints at the book stands and is finally removed so that more salable books can be put out.

However, in spite of her failures and bungled efforts, Mary's actions show in her an inchoate compassion and introspection. Even though she receives a letter from Bobbo asking her not to visit any more, she allows the children to remain, a fact which shows her developing sense of humaneness. Her life is so miserable that she considers suicide, but "trapped by her own awareness, her own new understanding, and indeed her new kindness" (244), she cannot do it because Bobbo's children and her mother need her. She must love them and care for them because no one else will. In spite of her loneliness, dejection, and financial worries, Mary learns that "If happiness is anything, it is a feeling of being essential" (245). Therefore, when the bank informs her she will have to put the High Tower up for sale to pay her debts and the children wonder how they

will live, Mary plans to buy a small and sensible house for herself, her mother, and Bobbo's children. The strain of Mary's situation finally takes its toll on her, however, as cancer invades her body. Dubino points out the irony of Weldon's inverse morality in *She-Devil*. When Mary is good--she regrets her part in the break-up of Bobbo's family, keeps Bobbo's children even after he goes to prison, converts to Catholicism and sells her worldly goods to save him--she is punished: she loses her fortune, her friends, her lover, her livelihood, and her health. Inversely, the reward for Ruth's devilry is attainment of her goals.

While remaining in the rebellion portion of Weldon's paradigm, Ruth carries out two further tasks before giving up the working world, both of which involve the further villification and destruction of Bobbo and Mary Fisher. First she obtains work at Judge Bissop's home as nanny and domestic helper. The judge is a handsome man of sixty who distrusts beauty and had therefore taken Lady Bissop as wife, a woman who was "not the kind of woman whom painters ran off with or for whom Troy fell" (158). Taking his job seriously, that of disposing "of another man's life when he personally had done you no particular harm" (159), the judge feels the pressures of his job to such an extreme that he is brutal to his family. He keeps his wife is perpetual fear of him and stuffs sand, salt, or dirt into his children's mouths when they annoy him. He expects the family to play their part in his eminent vocation. The penalty exacted by fate for their closeness to so exceptional a man is that they must not wake him during the night, or overtire him with demands or irritate him with noise or chatter. As a result, the house is quiet and the children are afraid to play. Furthermore, he takes out his tensions for a difficult job on his wife in the form of sexual sadism. In order to save his wife from the excesses of emotion demanded by sentencing, however, the judge saves up each month's sentencing and carries it all out in a week. During that time

his wife is bruised and bleeding and stays in her room.

The judge looks forward to getting to know Polly Patch, Ruth's alias, because he likes to see himself as being in touch with the ebb and flow of things and because he finds ugly people interesting. Since he finds most criminals ugly, he has a hard time trusting Ruth, but finally comes around over a period of time when he sees that not only does Ruth help things run smoother, but that she will respectfully and rationally stand up to him when she disagrees with him. How pleasant, he discovers, to find someone not in awe of him. Gradually, Polly takes on the role as receiver of "the sadistic energies. . . stimulated in the judiciary" (168). Lady Bissop comes to value Ruth supremely, for under her protection, the children thrive and look happy; the house runs efficiently, and the judge leaves the lady of the house alone at night. Instead he visits Polly, on whom he plies his "uxorious passion for bondage and whips" (168). Asking one night whether he is hurting her, she replies, "'Of course it hurts. . . . It's meant to hurt'" (172). When he counters that he is not a sadist, she concurs, "'I understand. . . . perfectly. What you are expected to do is unnatural and this is your response'" (176). Therefore, nightly he rams the message home with an old fashioned carpet beater that "The pain of one was the pleasure of the other" (180).

Finally gaining the complete trust of the judge, Ruth begins to discuss one of the judge's cases with him about an accountant who is accused of embezzling money. The judge thinks Bobbo ought to get about a year in prison, but over time and after many persuasive and rational conversations, Ruth suborns him into handing the offending accountant a seven-year sentence. This he does, so Ruth's job is finished at the judge's house, but not without her leaving a legacy. As Ruth had improved the lot of Geoffrey Tufton by healing his infected eye; as she had removed Nurse Hopkins out of the asylum and into a healthy environment which validated and nourished her; as

she had improved the health and assertiveness of the residents at Restwood, so Ruth helps the Bissop family before she leaves. The judge's wife is so relieved by Polly's assistance and care that she learns to rebuff her husbands' sadistic advances. Like many Ruth had touched before, she too learns to refuse the role of victim. Now when the judge approaches her during sentencing week, she shrieks so loudly that he feels obliged to sleep in the spare room. She tells the judge, "'I think [Ruth] was sent by heaven'" (183). When Polly Patch leaves following Bobbo's stern sentencing, the judge, his wife, and the children all weep and cling together in their grief, "achieving a closeness not normally theirs, but to be remembered as long as they lived" (183). The judge presently moves out of criminal law into tax litigation, calms his sexual life with his wife, and stops filling his children's mouths with sand and so forth, so that everyone thrives, even the new child Lady Bissop bears, whom they name Polly.

At this point, the novel echoes the pattern of Madeleine in *Remember Me*, about the betrayed woman who had refused to rest in peace until she had exacted revenge on her ex-husband, Jarvis. Once she had forced him to acknowledge his former love of her with compassion and regret, she withdraws her supernatural hold on events and evaporates into death, leaving a sense of approbation as her legacy. While she had waited for Jarvis's reversal, she had gradually worked goodness into the lives of those involved with her ex-husband: Margot, his part-time employee and mother of his child, had learned to put an end to her abuse and invisibility at home; Hilary had found a loving home with the doctor and his family; and Lily had learned compassion and self-sacrifice as a result of a near-death experience with her son. In the same confusing way in *She-Devil*, good ultimately comes from evil as Ruth brings about a positive transformation in people she touches at the same time that

she carries out her vile errands. One might even argue that Ruth, working her relentless revenge, effects in Mary a transformation into a more worthwhile human being.

Ruth has only one additional job to take and one last metamorphosis before she considers her earthly vengeance on Mary completed. After inquiring into plastic surgery as the final phase of her ultimate goal, Ruth is told that she must lose forty pounds before the doctors can begin. As a result, she takes a job with Father Ferguson, a known ascetic who lives in an old parish house and refuses to run heat in the winter or air conditioning in the summer because he is stingy and disapproves of material comforts. He is quite overcome by the state of his parish house, however, and needs someone to handle the myriad domestic problems. Although he works with the poor and keeps himself in trouble with his right-wing political activities, he and Ruth get along because she does not try to coax him into buying more food or clothing or into selling the parish house to greedy investors. She quietly moves in, washes and mends his old shirts, cleans the house, cooks tiny meals, and makes do with what is available. Father Ferguson is doubly pleased because Molly Wishant, Ruth's new alias, cannot possibly be seen by his parishioners as a source of erotic excitement and because she is somber, but intelligent and well-spoken.

Following her usual pattern, Ruth gains the complete trust and respect of the priest, then gradually begins to effect positive changes in him and his environment. She asks if she can have some soap to help clean his shirts and sheets. The stains on his trousers which had so baffled him, Ruth discovers to be the result of exuded drops of some kind of fungus in the top of his wardrobe. To combat the complaints that the house is haunted, Ruth puts 100-watt bulbs in the hall, solving that problem. She loses fifteen pounds in the first month of her employment there. Father Ferguson comes to value her work and her judgment so much that he, who had never

been interested in food, begins to tempt her to stay in his employ by offering her little morsels or sharing a bottle of sherry with her. The father even proposes to Ruth, and although she refuses, the two begin an affair. Basking in the delights of earthly pleasures, he eats bacon and eggs for breakfast and turns on the heater during chilly nights. Sharing Molly's bed, he understands why his flock is so insistent upon its sexual pleasures. His transformation from ascetic to lover of creature comforts and sexual lover of woman is complete. While readers may question the efficacy of his reform, these changes nevertheless produce in him a happiness and contentment he had never experienced before.

Once he is soft and pliable in Ruth's hands, having gained thirty pounds as opposed to Ruth's loss of twenty-five, she begins to work her second motive on the priest, that of starting a movement against romance fiction, and especially against the romance writer, Mary Fisher. Although Father Ferguson is uninterested in the issue, Ruth works on him relentlessly until he begins to come around as she continues to plot Mary's financial and emotional destruction. She helps him contrive the Theory of Literary Responsibility and to turn his energies onto the unsuspecting Mary Fisher. At the High Tower, he attacks Mary with, "'What you write is pernicious nonsense. . . . You must stop. Then you will begin to be good'" (228). He tells her how she has damaged the lives of millions of readers by giving them false expectations and that she is "personally responsible for much of the misery of the female multitude" (228). Heaping more guilt and remorse on Mary, he returns to Ruth with his mission accomplished. As a result, Ruth's stint with the priest is now complete. She has lost the required weight and has brought further misery onto Mary Fisher through Father Ferguson. Meanwhile Mary Fisher sinks further into sloth and disease. Aware of her Mary's condition, Ruth states,

> I can, I suppose, in the end, forgive Mary Fisher for many things. It was in the name of love that she did what she did, before I brought her to the understanding of what love is; or indeed, of what it is to be abandoned by a husband, to be condemned to a living death of humiliation, anxiety, and woe. I daresay I might have done the same myself, had I stood in her little size 4 shoes. But I don't forgive her novels. She-devils are allowed to be petulant. (210-11)

Thus far, Ruth's rebellion has been against Mary Fisher and Bobbo as the two people responsible for her marital disaster. However, the last portion of the books covers the second and ultimate object of her rebellion: God. Perceiving herself to be a she-devil, Ruth sets herself up as a sort of female Lucifer, a defier of the almighty. She tells Geoffrey Tufton early in the novel that she is taking up arms against God Himself: "Lucifer had tried and failed, but he was male. She thought she might do better, being female" (94). The old cliche, Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, aptly applies to the paroxysms of furor Ruth heaps onto to those who betray her, both God and man. Even though she sees herself as having drawn an unlucky ticket in the genetic lottery of life, she refuses to accept her fate once she metamorphoses into a she-devil. She rebels against God in the only way she knows, by insisting on defying nature. Angry at having been denied the love, attention, and approbation of the beautiful, Ruth vows to take revenge on the physical body God has damned her with.

Her defeat of Bobbo and Mary Fisher complete, she turns her full energies to her last major goal: to transform her body through plastic surgery into the exact image of Mary Fisher. Ruth first discusses this plan with a dentist she meets while working in the criminal mental asylum:

> "I mean to put the clock back," she said.
>
> "No one can do that."

> "Anyone can do anything," she replied, "if they have the will and they have the money."
>
> "We are as God made us," he protested.
>
> "That isn't true," she said. "We are here in this world to improve upon his original idea. To create justice, truth, and beauty where He so obviously and lamentably failed." (131)

During the time that Ruth is taking menial jobs as an asylum worker and domestic helper, she is beginning the preliminary steps for her physical transformation. Since the people she works for come to admire, trust, and depend upon her, holding her up as an example of finest character and intelligence, they obviously fail to understand why she wants to embark on such an expensive, dangerous, and painful endeavor. Lady Bissop tells Ruth that God put all on earth for a purpose and they should accept what He gives in the way of noses, teeth, and so forth. Politely disagreeing, Ruth tells the judge's wife that God's ways, "are far too mysterious. . . for me to put up with them any more" (168). Quoting the Hans Andersen little mermaid story in which the mermaid wanted legs instead of a tail so that she could be properly loved by her Prince, Ruth asserts that, "Anything that's worth achieving has its price. And by corollary, if you are prepared to pay that price you can achieve almost anything" (173). She understands the price paid by the mermaid, whose joint at the top of her legs was thereafter so painful as to make every step feel like treading on knives. Nevertheless, Ruth is willing to pay such a price herself.

Upon hearing her complex requests, Dr. Roche, the leading plastic surgeon, brings in his distinguished protege, Dr. Ghengis, of California where the genetic engineering is booming. After listening to Ruth's demands, the doctors ask her, "'what is it you *really* want?'" (204), to which Ruth replies, "'I want to look up to men'"

(204). Obviously, her response is ambiguous, but it is enough to get the doctors started. One final request from Ruth startles the doctors, but her determination and more than adequate funding bring about capitulation: she demands to have her legs shortened so that she loses six inches of height, even though no surgeon has ever removed more than three inches from a femur. They warn her that it is dangerous (she could die), it will take years, and it will cost millions, all terms which she accepts.

Dr. Ghengis considers Ruth's demands, then tells her, "'You are asking to be made pretty: trivial, if you will forgive me'" (236), but Ruth coldly observes, "'I have tried many ways of fitting myself to my original body, and the world into which I was born, and have failed. . . . Since I cannot change the world, I will change myself'" (237). Based on her own observations and experience, to be pretty is not a trivial request, but since the doctor has never suffered the stigma and humiliation of ugliness, he will never understand Ruth's point of view. However, using the publisher's photograph of Mary Fisher, the doctors begin their major reconstructive work, taking in the jaw, lowering the hairline, removing folds, pinning back ears, diminishing lobes, straightening and trimming the nose, reshaping the torso, taking in the arms and legs, and finally making numerous finely-tuned tucks, injections, and snips. While Dr. Roche worries about the surgery, Dr. Ghengis finally understands, "'all she has ever wanted is to be like other women'" (253).

During the last of the procedures, electrical storms and an earthquake interrupt the delicate surgery, an obvious reference by Weldon to the transfiguration of Frankenstein's monster. The unusual occurrences cause quite a scare for the doctors, who look for the supernatural implications. An earthquake occurs the day after Ruth's femur operation, knocking out the electricity and endangering the patient's life before it is restored. On the eve of her second operation, a violent electrical storm causes another power

outage. When the doctors worry about the meaning of all this, Ruth retorts that an act of God will not kill her because "'He has the Devil to contend with'" (269). Suddenly Dr. Ghengis is frightened and begs Ruth: "'I wish we could stop all this'" (269). But Ruth understands and accepts the physical manifestations as a sign from an angry God because "'I am remaking myself'" (269). As Ruth hovers between life and death after her massive surgeries, a final electric storm, in seeming rebellious defiance of God, sends a lightning bolt through the television aerial of the hospital, which stimulates Ruth into life, playfully settling the balance of power between God and Ruth. As Wilde notes, in proceeding with the surgery in spite of its ethical questions and physical dangers, "Ruth has dehumanized herself, has made herself as unnatural as Frankenstein's monster" (413).

As the doctors warned, side effects and pain take their toll on Ruth. The process takes four years and requires a great deal of time to heal, during which Ruth becomes addicted to heroine; however, she finally emerges small and pretty, in the image of Mary Fisher. As a result of the massive reconstruction, she has lost sensation in two fingers and has noticeable scarring on her legs and upper arms. Dr. Ghengis predicts walking will remain treacherous for the rest of her life. But Ruth is optimistic; she can lift a two-pound weight, she can walk, even run a little, although every step is excruciating. She overlooks this pain because she has succeeding in defying God: she has become an object of beauty in spite of His plan otherwise, and she has exacted the ultimate revenge on Mary and Bobbo.

Sadly, she fails to take pleasure in her other worthwhile accomplishments: the positive transformation she helped to bring about in those whose lives she had touched, both physical and emotional; the establishment of a unique and successful employment service; the learning of French, Latin, and Indonesian during her convalescence; the acceptance of a novel for publication she had

written; or the gaining of love and respect from those who knew her. For a feminist reviewing these accomplishments of a woman attempting to break out of her victimization, each alone is more than enough to declare Ruth a victor in her war against oppression, humiliation, and discrimination. Yet these feats mean nothing to her because they fail to fill that crushing need for self-love and approbation. At the beginning of her rebellion, Ruth had demanded revenge, power, money, and to love and not love in return. All these she obtains in the end, and in her own myopia, they are the only measures of her success.

Ruth purchases the High Tower, which is in ill-repair and threatens to fall from its precipice over the cliff because of the constant erosion of tides. Nature, she insists, "gets away with far too much. It needs controlling" (277). With money and determination, she manages to effect a change in nature by modifying the cliffs and bulkheads, which in their turn alter the direction and force of the tides to some small degree. As she had transformed her body into that of Mary Fisher, so she transforms the High Tower, modifying what God and man had earlier made by adding artificial copses and granite-fountained fish ponds, all to prove that,"Even nature bows to my convenience" (276).

As for Bobbo, Ruth brings him back to the High Tower once his prison sentence is over. He is only a shadow of the man he once was: graying and lethargic, helpless, and broken. As he had once treated Ruth, she now treats him to diabolic excess. She allows Garcia into the bedroom on some nights, making sure Bobbo knows about it, or she lets other lovers in. But rather than enjoy sex as the by-product of being beautiful and desirable, Ruth now sees it merely as a political act. In addition, Bobbo performs the acts Ruth once performed with submission: he pours her tea, mixes her drinks, and fetches things for her. She notes that "His eyes grow dull, as if he were already an old man. That is what humiliation does" (277).

"How weak people are!" she observes, "How they simply accept what happens, as if there were such a thing as destiny, and not just a life to be grappled with" (277). Her final consolation is that she now causes Bobbo as much misery as he ever caused her, and more. "I try not to," she says, "but somehow it is not a matter of male or female, after all; it never was: merely of power. I have all, and he has none" (277).

The ending of *She-Devil* gives rise to several important questions, most prominently, what price victory? Without a doubt, Ruth's vengeance is complete, and by any standards she is the victor inasmuch as she accomplishes what she intended and more. But like other victors in Weldon novels, her victory is qualified, and certainly this one is pyrrhic. It has a price, both in terms of physical pain and in her own surprising admission that in the end, Mary Fisher wins. When asked about *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Weldon says she sees the first half of the novel as:

> [An] exercise in feminist thought. . . . the feminist manifesto, really: a woman must be free, independent and rich. But I found myself asking, what then? What is the point of doing it all if you can't share your life with someone? I think women are discovering that liberation isn't enough. The companionship of women is not enough. The other side of their nature remains unfulfilled. (PW Interview 84)

This problem of feeling unfulfilled even after a woman has achieved freedom, independence, and wealth is what Ruth must face after her victory. When she possesses the High Tower and looks out to sea and inland to its beauty and contemplates her position, she recognizes this much:

> [I] make this my acknowledgment of [Mary], my grief for her, all that I have to give her. She is a woman: she made the landscape better. She-devils can make nothing better, except

themselves. In the end, she wins. (266)

Ruth has accomplished everything, but she has actually gained little in the end if one considers Weldon's premise that beyond revenge, power, and money lies the irrevocable need for happiness and love.

One of the issues raised by Ruth's behavior concerns how far a woman should go to exact revenge or accomplish her goals. Obviously, Ruth goes too far. She transforms herself in both positive and negative ways as she breaks out of her victimization from Bobbo, but one might see Weldon as emphasizing, as she had done with Madeleine in *Remember Me*, that revenge has its limits, beyond which is self-destruction. Weldon would never deny a woman the right to her rage nor even the desire for a little healthy revenge, but *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* illustrates what happens when anger and hatred propel a woman beyond all sense of rationality and proportion. Her suffering is greater than that which she inflicts on her victimizer.

One might also argue that Weldon believes a radical or extreme reaction is sometimes necessary in order for a woman finally to be heard. Alan Wilde discusses the fact that Weldon's novels seem intent on presenting their characters as either excessively or insufficiently bold (412). Chloe in *Female Friends*, for instance, is so insufficiently bold that she puts up with Oliver's abuse for years. In the case of both Ruth and Madeleine, being excessively bold enables the protagonists to accomplish their goals. Since exploitation seems to be the lot of Weldon's women, the sooner one can break out of it, the better, Weldon's novels say; furthermore, when a woman gets no outside support from family, friends, or society, drastic measures may be her only option. Radical actions like Ruth's and Madeleine's work if only because they are the sole way a woman can get attention; however, beyond a certain point, they become counterproductive. Weldon's narratives dramatize the fact that a woman must learn when it is time to give up, forgive, and

move on. Madeleine does so in the novel before this one, and everyone benefits. But monstrous excess leaves Ruth devoid of the qualities that had once made her a worthwhile human being. Furthermore, by allowing others to dictate what she should look like, Ruth has objectified herself, transforming herself into the epitome of the romantic heroine (Dubino 116) and unconsciously assuming the romantic writer's self-deceptive world view (Smith 256). Ruth was wrong: in the end of this novel, no one wins.

Praxis is another work whose ending may seem somewhat ambiguous, but not if one examines Weldon's belief that women and men need to learn to perceive relationships in a new way that rids them of the debilitating stigma of gender specificity. Praxis Duveen is a protagonist much like Chloe in *Female Friends* and Ruth in *She-Devil*: all long-suffering women who put up with the abuse of men far longer than they should, because they have been trained to believe that men's interests come first and a woman's happiness lies in fulfilling her roles as wife, mother, and overseer of the domestic realm. These are women who attempt to assimilate themselves into the role society has dictated for them, who do it well, then find themselves abandoned, abused, debased, or betrayed. Therefore Weldon attempts in these novels to find a new environment where maleness and femaleness no longer undermine the development of the human personality (Pratt 70).

Praxis hardly seems the kind of novel to break new ground in the gender wars or to define a new mode of being that gives both men and women the freedom to exist without the constraints of traditional roles. Like other Weldon protagonists, Praxis, whose name means "turning point" (PX 12) adheres to a narrative pattern of recognition => rebellion => victory. Even in victory, however, she feels old and worn out as if the gaining of self-knowledge and a commitment to a new mode of living have robbed her of the very life

she fought to create. Praxis is slow to catch on to the lessons of the women's movement and even does her own share of betraying, abandoning, and victimizing before she learns to commit to a new perception of life which ignores old standards that reduce or trivialize the needs of women. Nature itself, she discovers, is at fault and "does not know best, or if it does, it is on the man's side" (133). Nature, she feels, induces women to have children, then abandons them. The least humorous and most somber of Weldon's novels, *Praxis* pushes women to examine the nature of male and female roles, of female responsibility toward one another, and nature's role in women's lives. Like Byzantia in *Down Among the Women*, Praxis is poised on the brink of entering that new realm that defies social tradition and gender stereotyping.

Praxis begins very much like other Weldon heroines, an intelligent and well-behaved child who automatically assimilates her role in the world as passive and submissive. Growing up with an insane mother and an absent father under the care of her cruel, half-mad sister during and after the second world war, Praxis gets by with little help from the adult world, but does well in spite of her unfortunate beginnings. Like many others, she and her sister Hypatia make do during the war and learn to sublimate their interests and needs through study. Praxis is clever enough in school to obtain a university scholarship at Exeter, where she meets the first of three men who will victimize her. Like Chloe in *Female Friends*, she will put up with the abuse of men for years before she absorbs the lessons of the women's movement.

The first is Willie, a young and unappealing man whom she meets when she first enters the university. Young, attractive, and naive, she becomes the girlfriend of Willie when he and Phillip get her drunk, then flip a coin over which one will use her for sexual purposes that night. Over the next few years, Willie uses her

sexually, expects her to type his papers for him, and broods when she makes better grades than he. However, she quickly learns to make C's and to embellish and improve his papers when she types them so that he will make A's. Like Oliver in *Female Friends*, Willie persuades Praxis to give up her studies so she can support him through graduate studies, to move into the dreary house of her childhood that is now vacant, and to bring in an orphaned child that is being neglected by the local priest and his wife. Willie refuses to spend any money to make their lives more bearable even though he has scrimped and saved a fortune within a small time. When Praxis begs to go to work, he keeps her at home with domestic duties and with Baby Mary. She is miserable with the drudgery of hand-me-down clothes and cheap living, without complaining much or realizing that "Self-interest lay so deep, was so firmly rooted, in the very subsoil of Willie's nature that. . . it was simply what Willie was" (108). When she pleads for a holiday to escape the tedium of her life, he tells her, "'Your life is one long holiday'" (113). Rather than fight him, she accepts what he says, conceding that she should be happy with a house and a child and the support of a man. He tells her it is a pity she did not get her degree because now she cannot obtain decent work.

Out of utter boredom and unconscious anger, she and a friend become prostitutes at a local pub during the day, carefully choosing men and conducting the business in her friend's garden house. Praxis enjoys having a little money in her purse and the idolization of men; she begins to take some pleasure in sex. This state of affairs continues for some time until her father, whom she had not seen since childhood, comes into the pub and becomes one of her clients, finally revealing himself as the previous resident of her own home and giving enough details so that she has no doubt he is her father. The horror of what she has done gives her the impetus finally to leave Willie, a man whom she does not love will not marry. This

lack of commitment surfaces again as a pattern in her life that disconcerts and disappoints those who become involved with her.

With this portion of her life over, Praxis moves to the city, takes a job as a secretary at BBC, and makes herself into an inviting woman with her friend Irma's flashy cast-off clothes and a hair color job. Within three months she marries Ivor, an ambitious product manager of a soup-mix firm. Conventional and respectable, he insists that Praxis quit her job and stop using birth control. Even though Ivor is a clean-cut and decent man, Praxis does not feel she deserves him because of her past liaison with her father and poor self-esteem, and as a result she never completely bonds with him or the children she has by him, although she is a sensitive, caring mother who raises clean, well-mannered children. Their marriage finally falls apart when Ivor loses interest in Praxis and takes her to a neighborhood wife-swapping party, gets drunk, and trades her off for the wife of a neighbor for the night. Praxis realizes her husband is not to blame for her unhappiness, that she "preferred to live as a figment of Ivor's imagination, rather than put up with the confusion of being herself" (168). Therefore, when Irma calls asking Praxis to help her with the children while she goes to the hospital to have another baby, Praxis simply deserts the suburbs and her family.

Praxis's ability to victimize others is evident by now, yet she still retains reader sympathy because she too is victimized and does not know how to confront her problems: she simply gives in to men until she can take no more, then moves on because she knows of no other way to solve her problems. She suffers terribly from guilt over leaving her children, but knows she cannot live the kind of life Ivor expects--a suburban life of conformity, convention, and submission. There remains in Praxis too the feeling that she is not worthy of her perfect children, but there is no one to tell her otherwise. In the case of Irma and Phillip, who are married, Praxis

moves in to help with the children while Irma is in the hospital, then falls into bed with Phillip because she had loved him ever since college when he and Willie had flipped a coin for her. She justifies her actions by saying Irma does not love Phillip and causes agonizing pain for her former friend when she announces that she intends to stay with Phillip in his house. Crushed and furious, Irma moves away and becomes a feminist. Within a short time, Praxis realizes that Irma has forgiven her and marvels that "Irma's feeling for her ran so much deeper than her own for Irma" (193). This capacity for forgiveness is one of Irma's legacies to Praxis and later enables her to act more compassionately towards other women.

After years of living with Phillip, many of them happy but harried, Praxis is exhausted and fed up. Phillip is a moody film-maker who depends on her salary to get them through erratic times, yet he refuses to let her hire a house cleaner. As a result, Praxis must come home from work, take care of Phillip's and Irma's two difficult children, and cook a three-course meal for Phillip, who likes to invite his friends for dinner. Guests all agree Phillip is lucky to have Praxis: "She seemed to have all the qualities needed in a wife. An excellent cook, a good earner, a lively conversationalist and a loving mother; a scarlet past and a virtuous present" (198). In spite of all this, Phillip begins to take long trips from home during production of his films, and Praxis, suspecting less than sterling behavior from him, asks few questions about his activities off the set. When she surprises him on location in Sussex, she finds him in bed with Serena, who soon replaces Praxis as Phillip's wife. Embittered and enraged, Praxis now knows how Irma had felt years before and somehow summons the strength and compassion to forgive Serena, warning her as Irma had warned Praxis earlier, that she would be sorry. Praxis's prophecy comes true after a few years.

Irma improves herself after she loses Phillip. Rather than worry about flashy clothes or material possessions, she becomes a

spokeswoman for the women's movement in her area and repeatedly attempts to pull Praxis into the fold, both before and after the breakup of Praxis and Phillip, but Praxis is uncomfortable with the women because she dresses and lives sensuously, puts up with infidelity and abuse from Phillip, and works on an ad campaign for the electric company that demeans and trivializes women's lives. Her desire to distance herself from the women derives from the fact that she sees these as women who are to be pitied, women who do not dress attractively, "women without men: the rejects" (211). So unsympathetic is she to the cause for women that she storms out of a meeting, declaring "I really can't take a roomful of women seriously" (211). Her abandonment by Phillip, the constant barrage of attention to the women's movement, and Irma's repeated appearances on television to educate women and to raise their consciousnesses finally begin to make sense to Praxis. When she bitterly tries to place all the blame on Phillip for the shambles of her life, Irma forces her to realize how complicitous she has been in her own victimization and that a whole new world view would be required of her to assimilate the lessons from her past errors. Irma exhorts her to see this experience as the beginning of a new life rather than the end of her old life.

And Praxis does. She quits her job, which now requires her to advertise for a cigarette company, goes back to the women's groups and begins to edit the weekly broadsheet put out by them. With Praxis's persuasive writing skills, the sheet quickly grows into a newspaper with Praxis as editor. At first she only half believes what she writes, the way she had been with the electricity campaign, but with time she becomes a true convert to the women's movement. Seeing her conversion as a rebirth, she proselytizes wherever she sees women betrayed, exploited, and oppressed. She writes editorials of such power and vehemence that people listen to

her and believe; they cut out her articles, stick them on walls, quote them in arguments. Focusing on real discontent and the capacity for alteration, Praxis begins to believe that the world really can change, if not for herself, then for the people who come after her. She appears on television to discuss reform of the abortion laws and reaches enough fame that she is recognized on the street. Phillip and his friends call Irma and their ilk lesbians and frustrated dykes who need a good lay.

Praxis's commitment to women and to her own evolving philosophy is tested when Mary, the young woman she had helped raise with Willie and whom she had sent to medical school, gives birth to a mongoloid child. Having planned her life carefully to practice in America, Mary then put her career on hold while she has two children by Edward, who leaves her. Becoming pregnant by a man she had met at a party, she does not feel it is right to have an abortion so carries the baby to term. When the retarded child arrives, Mary and Praxis both know her career and her hopes for a decent future are over. Mary had hoped the doctors had just let the baby die--not killing him but not treating him either. "'Life itself is not important,'" she tells Praxis, "'Only the manner of living'" (241). Mary refuses to put the baby up for adoption or to let Praxis care for it. Aggrieved for Mary and the fate she stands to suffer if she has to care for a retarded child and her two children without any other support, she puts a pillow over the infant's face and smothers it while Mary is in the bathroom. Seeing the death as tragic but merciful, the doctor asks few questions; however, Praxis insists on confessing to the death. "'I'm sorry,'" she tells Dr. Gibb and Mary, "'But the fact is that the baby was alive and good for another forty years of semi-vegetable living'" (243). Tragic as the death of the child is, Praxis does not regret what she has done and sees her action as having been the instrument of a higher will. She feels as though she has "passed into the real world, where feelings were

sharp and clear, however painful" (243). The two year sentence the judge hands down is light, but the time in prison ages Praxis by decades. She is heartbroken for Mary's baby, for her own failures in life, and especially for having abandoned her children. She nevertheless remains steadfast in her belief that what she had done was right; that her children would never have to suffer the pain of a haunting, insane mother of the kind that Praxis herself had. They were free to develop in their own best interests.

Praxis cuts herself off from all previous acquaintances while in prison and contemplates women's lot in life. Some of the conclusions she reaches are that women owe their friends more, especially female friends; that a mother fulfilling her purpose of "mindless biological destiny" (148) is neither spiritually exalted nor greatly loved; and that women betray themselves as much as men betray them:

> Our bodies betray us, leading us to love where our interests do not lie. Our instincts betray us, inducing us to nest-build and procreate--but to follow instinct is not to achieve fulfillment, for we are more than animals. Our idleness betrays, and our apathy--murmuring, oh, let him decide! . . . Our passivity betrays us, whispering in our ears, oh, it isn't worth a fight! He will only lie on the far side of the bed! or be angry and violent! or find someone else more agreeable! We cringe and placate, waiting for the master's smile. It is despicable. We are not even slaves. (205)

She bemoans the way women betray each other, manipulate through sex, fight each other for the possession of men, and prefer the company of men to women in spite of their sisterly bond.

These thoughts thus far sound much like those uttered in other Weldon novels; indeed, they could well jump from the pages of *Female Friends* when Chloe goes on a similar diatribe against

women who are loyal to men at the expense of other women. However, Weldon's next thoughts get to the heart of women's place in creation as progenitors of the race and her questions about the sanctity of nature. Who gives women the nature, Praxis querries, to love their children, to clean their houses, to thrill with pleasure when the man comes home? Is it God, or is it women's "disposition, as laid down by evolutionary forces, in order to best procreate the species" (133)? Praxis believes the latter and argues that "Nature does not know best, or if it does, it is on the man's side. . . . we must fight nature tooth and claw" because once women are past child-bearing age, "this Nature, this friend, we hear so much about disposes of us" (133). Praxis considers the drying up of estrogen, the brittling of bones, the clouding of eyes and tempers after women's biological destinies are used up. Nature does not know best, she concludes; it is "an argument used, quite understandably, by men" (133). Nature, Praxis knows, is neutral to Mary's plans for a medical career, is neutral to women's suffering and yearnings outside of the procreative energies. Women, she determines, must take control of their own lives and fates.

Praxis comes through her prison term, ill and feeling abandoned. She is so broken at first that, like her insane mother before her, she pretends (and truly feels) extreme old age. She writes, feeds a stray cat, complains about the New Women, stands in queue each Thursday for her weekly check from Social Security, and nurses a bad elbow and toe. Raging, grieving, laughing, and nearly dying, she finally begins to feel better. Getting herself to the doctor's office by bus and hobbling in like a woman who has aged two decades in two years, Praxis waits for her appointment. The young female doctor recognizes Praxis as the once-famous woman who had helped to change the world and rushes to get treatment for her. Praxis, who wants not recognition but relief from her physical discomfort, learns that she is not senile, but undernourished. They ply her with

eggs, medicine, and attention so that in a while her skin is better, her eyes brighter, and her hair thicker. Now a manuscript she has written "is carefully sorted and . . . . There are flowers everywhere" (250). Although her bodily aches are assuaged, Praxis still suffers the pain in her heart, soul, and mind, that of a fragile child who grew up without the help of mother or father, and who lived the consequences of a emotionally-starved childhood in her adult life. In spite of this, she is surrounded by "a babel of People, mostly women, either embarrassingly servile or self-consciously unimpressed. Cameras click and whirr. I have been elected heroine" (250).

Irma has been lost to cancer, but the lessons she and Praxis preached about women helping each other have obviously reached the public consciousness, for they take in and nurture Praxis at the height of her despair, forcing her to see that human lives have meaning and purpose, "if not in our own eyes, at least in those of other people" (251). Finally embracing life itself, she claims, "I have thrown away my life, and gained it. The wall which surrounded me is quite broken down. I can touch, feel, see my fellow human beings. That is quite enough" (251). If the novel is said to follow Weldon's paradigm of recognition => rebellion => victory, then Praxis's victory here is a debatable one. Critics certainly debate it. Wilde finds the novel the "most confused and confusing of Weldon's novels, uncertain of whether it is irony or sympathy that is called for" (410). He sees Praxis as vacillating between passive martyr, convert to feminism, and activist fanatic. He also finds the change or equilibrium offered at the end to be "disconcertingly ambiguous" (411). Krouse, on the other hand, sees Weldon's novels as uniting the negative feminism "necessarily evident in novels portraying the problems of women, with a positive feminism, evident in the belief that change or equilibrium is possible" (20).

But if one sees the novel as one in which a woman dares to

question the role of nature and yet embraces life in spite of what she sees as a natural bias against women, then the conflicts can be resolved. Fiction, Weldon writes, "if it is any good, tends to be a subversive element in society" (*Letters to Alice* 66), and *Praxis* illustrates the author's conviction that women must look for that subversive new space where they are free to pursue their own natures, in conjunction with or aside from those offered by traditional modeling. At the end of *Praxis*, the heroine is free to move to that next stage, in the path that Irma had begun to clear. Such a road does not promise happiness, however, and as Anita Brookner notes, Praxis survives against the odds to enjoy "not happiness but our sympathy and, in addition, our moral approbation" (469). Weldon too admits of her own life that "happiness is a secondary goal to self-realization" and that "a liberated woman is one who has freedom of choice" (*Novelists in Interview* 306). Because Praxis has made choice possible in the lives of women through her persuasive activism and commitment to an iconoclastic ideology, she may, given some time, be able to enjoy the fruits of her own labor.

CHAPTER IV

THE NOVELS OF MARGARET ATWOOD

At the age of thirty, Margaret Atwood began her formal career as a novelist with the publication of *The Edible Woman.* In this novel, she began to focus her attention upon women's issues even though her literary concerns extended far beyond women's victimization. How women are abused in male relationships, in female relationships, and in consumerist society became the subject of Atwood's earliest fiction. Also apparent was the author's intense apprehension about the Canadian environment and its exploitation. As a result, Atwood has consistently emphasized in her fiction, poetry, and non-fiction the responsibility which individuals and institutions have to protect the planet from harm and destruction. Furthermore, she has underscored the individual's duty to resist the victim role and in her later fiction has moved toward solutions derived from creative interdependence.

Several of Atwood's early novels conform to a narrative pattern in which the protagonists go through the stages of recognizing their victimization, of fleeing from it in either literal or metaphoric form, and finally of renouncing whatever forces have victimized them. The structure in these novels, which includes *The Edible Woman, Surfacing,* and *Cat's Eye*, appears as such:

Recognition => Flight => Renunciation

In addition, the main characters in *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye* undergo a process similar to that outlined by Joseph Campbell called the monomyth, in which the hero gains strength and insight by separating herself from the world and penetrating to some source of

power. Following the ordeal, she experiences a "life-enhancing return" to the world (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 35). Only in her latest fiction has Atwood managed to create solutions for her characters without relying on a mythic flight or an illuminating submergence such as those found in *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye*. As attested to in her latest novel, *The Robber Bride*, Atwood is shifting away from the structural pattern found in her early fiction (recognition => flight => renunciation) to a more solution-oriented paradigm:

recognition => action => resolution

The protagonists of her first two novels, however, are inexperienced young women who are not as self-aware or creative as later heroines. They are capable and intelligent, but at the same time lack the ability to create insightful solutions. Their stories both end with a recognition and renunciation of the forces which have sought to victimize them, but neither has the intuitive perception necessary to move into the next stage of being. As one critic remarks, these women begin their adventures in need of a new identity, a voice, and a language to help them find a comfortable way of being (Rigney 10). At the end of their stories, they are just beginning to absorb the lessons of their experiences.

In the case of *The Edible Woman,* described by one critic as an up-to-date comedy of manners (MacLulich 180) with an "anti-consumer-society thesis" (Rigney 4), Atwood explores the narrow range of opportunities society offers to women and the way in which one woman discovers that she simply cannot accept the prescribed life outlined for her by society. In addition, the novel deals with a "world of technological hedonism," in which the dominant aesthetic is conformity to the consumer ideal (Onley 73,74). In *The Edible Woman,* according to Russell Brown, Atwood dramatizes her belief that the primal myths that have traditionally provided comfort and knowledge are covered over with new ones that serve to suppress

individuality and encourage materialism (224). In an interview, Atwood admits that the book deals partly with the false gods she sees people worshiping in her society. Previously, she says, the god was success--making lots of money and "stomping" others in order to do so--but now she believes the current god is "fitting into the machine" (*Eleven Canadian Novelists* 31). And even though this makes individuals victims, they are also implicated as collaborators. Russell believes that from the beginning, Atwood's novels deal on some level with "the discovery of the gateways" to an internal world of sacred space, one's true locus (Brown 225).

In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood brings together a woman who is only dimly aware of her need of personal gods or true locus, and a fiance who worships the technological-consumer gods. The three-part narrative focuses on Marian, a young college graduate and market researcher, who begins her story in first person and who does not fully perceive the spiritual barrenness of her society, her place in it, or her limited choices as an unmarried woman. Her job is to canvas the public on its beer consumption. Ironically, then, she is both an agent of the machinery she serves and a victim of it. The novel fits loosely into the quest motif, for Marian is seeking an identity as she fights against being assimilated into the mechanized world she encounters at the personal, professional, and spiritual levels of her life.

The first place where Marian feels a sense of isolation is at Seymour Surveys, where she constructs and distributes question-and-answer forms regarding consumer preferences for products. Office politics, she discovers, involve maintaining a structured hierarchy in which the men (the psychologists and executives) inhabit the offices on top where attractive paintings hang. Marian has caught only glimpses of this sacred ground. She is housed on the floor beneath the men, the second level, where women "take care of

the human element" (18); they are the interviewers. Below Marian's level is the bottom floor, a literal and symbolic cave where the "frayed" and "overworked" (18) office "operatives" count, sort, and tabulate their information on clattering machines. In this company, young women who marry are expected to give up their employment since pregnancy constitutes, according to her supervisor, "an act of disloyalty" (23). In addition, Marian does not feel comfortable with the women on her floor, whom she calls the office virgins, all vapid bleached blondes in desperate search of available bachelors.

Another level of Marian's life that finally disappoints and isolates is her personal love life, which seems ideal on the outside, for she is engaged to a young lawyer who, after resisting engagement, finally capitulates and then basks in his new role as "rescuer from chaos, a provider of stability" (91). Peter is aptly described by one critic as an "egocentric, pre-packaged, *Playboy*-defined pseudo-man" (Rosenberg 97) who subconsciously assimilates into the dehumanizing machine, never perceiving its influence over his life. His attraction to Marian is in part the fact that she is such a "sensible" girl" (89), the kind of girl his society approves. "'I've always thought [being sensible is] the first thing to look for when it comes to choosing a wife" (89), he tells her as he eagerly treads toward assimilation and material comfort. The imagery associated with Peter has to do with hunting, fixing, and diminishing. For instance, on the night he proposes to Marian, his eyes narrow, "as though he was taking aim" (82). After he proposes to Marian in his car, a blue lightening flash illuminates the darkness long enough for Marian to see herself, "small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (84). The idea of being targeted and then captured into an image forever makes Marian uncomfortable; therefore, she avoids Peter's camera when she begins to feel threatened by the idea of a fixed future with him.

The first hint that Marian resists social assimilation occurs

when the company demands that she sign up for a pension plan. She blanches at the obligation because she finds herself "subject to rules I had no interest in and no part in making" (20). In part, it is her fear of losing her freedom of choice by being bound to "a future so far ahead I couldn't think about it" (20). Since Marian has never questioned her choices before, she has been precisely the kind of girl admired by society: modest, sensible, and passive. However, she begins to question her role when she and Peter become engaged and she starts to realize the sacrifices she will have to make for their marriage: she must quit her job and become the kind of wife Peter has been conditioned to expect. When she attempts to look into their future, she pictures herself as merely a two-dimensional image with a balding Peter at the barbeque with a long fork in his hand. The vision is not comforting because Marian is starting to realize that "to enjoy the fruits of the romantic illusion--prince and castle and happily ever after--she must abrogate her former self" (St. Andrews 92); therefore, even the illusion Peter offers fails to nourish or appeal to her.

Other warning signals impose themselves on the oblivious Marian during the first portion of the novel. At a restaurant one night, she becomes uncomfortable while listening to Peter relate a story of a rabbit he had hunted and viciously killed. Identifying with the victimized rabbit, she flees the restaurant, literally taking flight on foot. When Peter finally catches her, she cannot think why she has behaved so oddly since she is only dimly aware that her involvement with her fiance has something to do with it. This pattern of flight takes several forms as Marian's subconscious guides her to rebel against Peter. At a get-together at a friend's apartment a few minutes later, she unaccountably finds herself edging under the bed. While Peter entertains himself for hours with his host, ignoring Marian all the while, Marian begins to feel inconsequential,

unimportant, and even absurd. Her momentary feeling of safety while under the bed from the meaningless chatter of the evening evaporates when she realizes she is trapped under the bed and covered with lint and dusty fluff.

Marion finds herself automatically capitulating to the role of passive fiance and bride-to-be. When Peter asks when she would like to get married, Marian is astounded to hear herself respond, "'I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you'" (92). Almost immediately she imagines that "Somewhere in the vaults of Seymour Surveys an invisible hand was wiping away my signature" (91). The abdication of authority over one's life is a constant theme throughout the novel, showing the ways that Marian willingly relinquishes her autonomy and selfhood and accepts victimization. To resist Peter's subjugation will bring about a struggle, but simply giving in out of social habit and tradition will further erode her ability to become a productive, integrated person. Therefore, a great deal of responsibility for her victimization lies in her own complicity in the act. In fact, when Part Two opens, because she has relegated all decisions to Peter, Marian is no longer speaking in first person. A third person narrator, who is still Marian, takes over to dictate her story, a narrator who deliberately sees herself as an object rather than a subject (Rosenberg 101). Only in Part Three after she has broken her engagement from Peter does Marian reclaim her own "I" in the narrative.

Since Marian is unable to articulate her concerns about being assimilated into a society and a marriage into which she does not fit, her body unconsciously takes over the job of alerting her by developing an eating disorder. Marian gazes at a piece of steak during dinner with Peter one evening and suddenly sees it as a piece of muscle, part of a real cow that had been slaughtered. From then on she rejects meat, and shortly thereafter eggs after a yolk looks up at her one morning "with its one significant and accusing yellow

eye" (165). Marian concludes that her body is simply taking an ethical stand by refusing to take in anything that had once been living. Subconsciously, however, she is identifying with the idea of being consumed and becomes unable to control her body's urgings. Soon, even a carrot is unacceptable when she thinks of its root growing in the ground and sending up leaves. Finally, her disorder takes on the broader problems she is unable to articulate, becoming in one critic's words, "a metaphor for economic and emotional cannibalism" that threaten her (Grace *Violent Duality* 94).

Her silent revolt crests on the night of their engagement party. For the occasion, Peter exhorts his fiance to wear a sexy red-sequined dress that makes her uncomfortable. "'I love you especially in that red dress,'" he tells her (237). A trip to the beauty parlor and a make-up session with Ainsley produce a pasted-on and overdone look that makes Marian feel self-conscious and out of character so that she balks when she looks into the mirror and again when Peter attempts to take a picture of her. To her, the mirror and the photos threaten to permanently fix her into an image that is becoming increasingly impossible for her to maintain. As Sherrill Grace observes, "Although Marian's perceptions of herself as hunted victim or tasty morsel about to be devoured are distortions of reality for which she is largely responsible, these perceptions carry a symbolic truth about the general nature of our society and personal relationships" (*Violent Duality* 91). Ours is a consumer society, she concludes, in which "we feed on each other economically and emotionally" (91). Marian finally perceives at her engagement party why she is so overwrought over the night's events. She sees this evening as a microcosm of her future marriage: "only this bungalow-and-double-bed man, this charcoal-cooking-in-the-backyard man. This home-movie man'" (249).

Realizing she no longer can continue in the role of either victim

or morsel, Marian flees for the last time, literally exiting the party without a word to Peter. The next day she invites him over in order to explain her actions, but when he arrives, she offers him a large, luscious cake she has just baked in the shape of a woman. The face is vacant and doll-like, but beautiful. "You look delicious," Marian tells the cake, "And that's . . . what you get for being food" (277-78). She offers the cake to Peter, saying, "'You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you. . . . to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better'" (278). Now it is Peter's turn to blanch. He rejects her statement, and in doing so rejects not only self-knowledge (Onley 74), but any opportunity to salvage his relationship with his fiance.

Now that Marian has freed herself from the "doggedly normal life" (Woodcock 93) she had insisted on pursuing against her own inner urgings, her eating disorder simply evaporates. Suddenly, she begins to devour the edible woman she has baked. George Woodcock says Marian has metaphorically eaten herself, the artificial "normal" person she had tried to become (93). Also at this point, as Part Three begins, Marian once again takes over her narrative in first person. Now that she has asserted herself and refused to be a victim, she once more becomes subject rather than object. In running away from Peter and the world he represents, says Onley, Marian has defeated "the shaping power of the sexist consumer society" (73-74). But some critics find the ending dissatisfying, asking, rightly, where does Marian go from here? She has lost her apartment, her fiance, and her job. Society has not changed simply because she has rejected its false values. In an interview with Linda Sandler, even Atwood admits that the novel is circular with Marian ending where she began (*Malahat Review* 13-14).

But Marian does not end exactly where she began because she has achieved at least some level of self-knowledge by the end of her narrative. She realizes what it is that has been trying to assimilate

her and she rejects it. By refusing to live by the prescribed ideals set up by society and enforced by Peter, she has recognized her victimization and renounced it. It is true that Marian's future is uncertain, but from this point onward she will face the world without attempting to escape it through panic, flight, or starvation. Atwood notes that until the end of the novel, Marian has been "evading, avoiding, running away, retreating, withdrawing" (*Eleven Canadian Novelists* 25) whereas at the end of the novel there exists the future possibility of a "creative harmony" with the world (27) since she is no longer entrapped by her own ignorance and paralysis.

The protagonist of *Surfacing*, an unnamed narrator in Atwood's second and arguably best novel, suffers from many of the same problems as Marian. She too is young and inarticulate, intelligent but lacking in insight and a sense of personal identity. Like Marian, she feels threatened by the jaws of social conformity, the "machine," as the narrator of *Surfacing* identifies it (SU 202). Even though Atwood employed the same narrative structure in *Surfacing*, that of recognition => flight => renunciation, she nevertheless expanded her concerns in this novel to include the victimization of Canada and its precious natural resources as a result of Western Industrialism; the loss of original gods to imported American religion; the ways in which married people victimize and brutalize one another in the guise of love; and the ways in which a female friend will callously betray another when a conflict involves the choice between defending the female friend and remaining on good terms with a man. In addition, the narrator of *Surfacing* has been ill-used in a disastrous love affair and struggles, like Marian in *The Edible Woman*, in a new relationship with a man whose conformity to tradition and whose need to dominate threaten her sense of freedom. *Surfacing*, which Northrop Frye declares an "extraordinary

novel" (321), is most clearly about how the narrator develops her own sense of identity after confronting and reconciling the disparate facts of her life. The identity she develops is on the female and personal level as well as on the national level (St. Andrews 86). Once she "surfaces" from her experience, she is equipped to face the victimization from which she has suffered and finds new tools for asserting herself. Yet she cannot make any progress until she heals the split between her body and her mind, an ailment that Bonnie St. Andrews calls the "age-old dilemma of the divided sensibility" (91). In this novel, the mythic water into which she dives is the medium for the Surfacer's unification and survival (86). Therefore, the story takes the form of a spiritual quest in which the diver searches for healing and unity.

The opening sentence of the novel introduces the dual images of death and disease as a first person narrator travels to northern Quebec to search for her missing father. An artist in her twenties who is metaphorically dead, she has been estranged from her father for years and feels a sense of dread as she returns to the primitive wilderness where she grew up. Lamenting, "I can't believe I'm on this road again" (3) as she notices the dying white birches, she blames her malaise on "the disease . . . spreading up from the south" (3), which refers to the crass Americans who are buying, despoiling, and exploiting her native Canada. But she discovers on this two-week journey that the disease from which she suffers comes not only from the South, but also from within Canada, and most importantly from within herself. Somehow, she has become so powerless in her life that she admits, "I don't know the way any more" (9), and "I used to have dreams but I don't any longer" (48). Also, she remembers having a past, perceives no present (84), but rather sees poorly and translates badly" (90); she admits, "I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time" (125). She looks into an old family album, trying to discover when her sense of isolation

and despair set in and decides that she has metaphorically been cut in two:

> Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate, wearing a bathing suit, smiling, a trick done with mirrors, I read it in a comic book; only with me there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb. (129)

The idea of a woman sawn apart in a crate is an effective metaphor of the narrator's perception of her own division. Her body functions, but it does not feel. On an intellectual level at least, she is aware of what afflicts her: 'The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate" (89). If the head is detached from the body, she realizes, "both of them will die" (89); this separation then explains the narrator's emotionally death-like state.

Like Marian in *The Edible Woman*, who feels isolated and thwarted on every level of her life, the narrator of *Surfacing* similarly feels divided or disjointed. Part of her unhappiness results from a non-traditional childhood, in which she and her brother grew up on an isolated and primitive island in the Canadian wilderness during summers and in various villages during winter. In one way, she believes she had a good childhood because her parents shielded her from the the evils of World War II; she had not even know about it until after it was over and her brother told her. But living as they did as English-speaking *anglais* in northern Quebec, her family had a reputation for being peculiar. Each year she went to a different school once the snow moved in and had trouble adapting to a new culture, becoming hermit-like and resisting her mother's attempts to "civilize" her (82). As a result of never fitting in, she

now calls her home ground "foreign territory" (8). And about her childhood, she says, "Being socially retarded is like being mentally retarded, it arouses in others disgust and pity and the desire to torment and reform" (83).

Even her attempts to find spiritual comfort in the predominantly Catholic location proved fruitless as a child. Although her parents shielded her from Christianity because of what her father perceived as its distortions, she had begged to go to Sunday School, "like everyone else" (61). But the idea of "a dead man in the sky watching everything I did" (50) had frightened her. Then when she learned about prayer and prayed for God to make her invisible and when in the morning everyone could still see her, she knew "they had the wrong God" (84). Evelyn J. Hinz, who has studied Atwood's religious roots, discusses how the lack of religious upbringing and its consequent secular reverberations create havoc for her protagonists, especially the narrator in *Surfacing*. Often, these women are nameless, passive victims, unable to form meaningful relationships (23). What they need, says Hinz, are rituals that are enactments of divine models (29) and to create their own "thealogy" out of their experiences (23). Looking back on her childhood attempts to acquire some sense of spiritual understanding, the narrator still finds Christ "the alien god, mysterious to me as ever" (11). These thoughts only intensify her sense of isolation and illustrate Atwood's belief that Christianity in Canada is "imported religion" (*Eleven Canadian Novelists* 31) and therefore impotent. One of the things she attempts to show in *Surfacing* is how the feeling of being cut off spiritually, and how the failure of secular substitutes, only add to one's sense of despair and victimization. In an interview with Gibson, Atwood asserts:

> The assumption of the book, if there is one, is that there are gods that do exist here, but nobody knows about them. . . . The

> other thing that the imported gods will always tell you to do is to destroy what is there, to destroy what is in place and to make a replica of the god's place, so that what you do is you cut down all the trees and you build a gothic church or imitation thereof. And I think that the authentic religion that was here has been destroyed; you have to discover it in some other way. (31)

Discovering this "other way" is what *Surfacing* is about--how victims refuse to be victimized any longer; how they go about finding their true gods, or as Hinz says, "something 'eternal' beyond the self" (26); and finally how in doing so they reach a place of "productive or creative harmony" within themselves and in the world (*Eleven Canadian Novelists* 27).

Factors other than disappointment over a displaced religion only add to the narrator's sense of loneliness and alienation. Her relationship with her mother, for instance, who had died a few years earlier, haunts her. Rigney points out that even though the ostensible search on the island is for the missing father, the metaphoric search is for the Mother (*Margaret Atwood* 54). The narrator had seen her mother as a possessor of magic with the ability to charm animals and birds and to command a bear. When her mother developed a lengthy illness, the narrator had had such faith in her mother's ability to restore life that she had "ceased to take her illnesses seriously" (37). Finally, when she dies, the narrator feels only disappointment and betrayal that her mother had not resurrected herself in order to "go away by herself into the forest" to die (180). Most painful, though, is the fact that her mother failed to set aside a special token, object or word for the daughter she was leaving behind. Even her diary was devoid of references to her daughter; in it she discovers "no reflections, no emotions" (21), only a record of the seasons and the weather. The narrator also wonders why, after she had unexpectedly disappeared from home, her mother

had never asked why, "though she might not have asked anyway, feeling as she always had that personal questions were rude" (21).

Therefore, the narrator has never come to terms with her mother's death and resists dredging up the painful, confusing, and unresolved past. Most critics, Rigney and Grace, for instance, see the narrator as "a kind of Persephone who must return from the underworld to find and to re-create herself in her mother" (Rigney 54). And in a sense the mother does, in fact, become a Demeter, the goddess capable of restoring life to the dead as she had saved her son from a near-drowning experience when he was a child, but more importantly, as she figuratively saves her daughter from the emotional death in which she is now helplessly trapped.

In her professional life also, the narrator has felt disappointed and victimized. She had given up her ambition to become a true artist because her previous lover, a married art teacher who had given her C's and D's, had convinced her that there had never been any important woman artists and that she should instead go into design and make fabric patterns. After her training, she lands a job as a commercial artist, but is stymied once again by the publisher, who prefers a watered-down version of her work. In an employment manual, for instance, she must paint people with "lobotomized grins" (59). Mr. Percival does not want to see anything "disturbing" in her art and insists that for the cover of her current job, *Quebec Folk Tales,* she design princesses and castles, images which have nothing to do with the Canadian tales in the book or with the native culture. Instead of fighting for and maintaining her artistic integrity, the narrator admits, "So I compromised; now I compromise before I take the work in, it saves time. I've learned the sort of thing he wants: elegant and stylized. . . . something [that] will interest the English and American publishers too" (59). With her artistic freedom limited, she becomes a victim of a company looking

only for profit; therefore, like the people on the manual cover, she feels lobotomized in her creative and professional efforts.

Furthermore, she has fared even worse in her love life. She is currently living with a man whom she describes as a failure (65). Joe is a potter who makes mutilated pots with holes and slashes in them, pots that do not sell because of their "disagreeable mutant quality" (64). He is a man with "small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction" (5). An uncommunicative man for whom "speech . . . was a task, a battle, words mustered behind his beard and issued one at a time" (91), he prefers his woman to be like him. What impressed him about the narrator, she says, was "the way I took off my clothes and put them on again later very smoothly as if I were feeling no emotion" (29). Her relationship with Joe is obviously one which does not encourage emotional closeness or intimacy. When Joe asks the narrator about news of her father, he does so in "a neutral mumble that signals he'd prefer it if I kept from showing any reaction, no matter what has happened" (29). At one time during the car trip toward Quebec, when the narrator is upset to see that the roads have changed and she no longer knows the way , she fights to suppress her emotions because, "I'll start crying, that would be horrible, none of them would know what to do and neither would I" (10). It is as though Joe and the the other couple are free of a sense of their historical pasts and of familial responsibility, and this difference causes a chasm between them and the narrator: "[M]y reason for being here embarrasses them, they don't understand it. They all disowned their parents long ago, the way you are supposed to: Joe never mentions his mother and father, Anna says hers were nothing people and David calls his The Pigs" (15).

Also disturbing on the trip up north, the narrator is trying to decide if she loves Joe because she fears he will soon start asking about her feelings and she is not sure how to respond. When she

thinks about his assets, she chalks up points for his being good in bed, for being moody, but "not much bother" (46), for paying for half the rent, but mostly because "he doesn't talk much, that's an advantage" (46). She admits she moved in with him, not because she wanted to or as a result of a rational decision, but that "it was more like buying a goldfish or a potted cactus plant, not because you want one in advance but because you happen to be in the store and you see them lined up on the counter" (46). Since their relationship is built on mutual respect for each's utter separateness and seeming inability to feel, they live in an emotional isolationism that prevents real caring and communication.

Trouble develops in their relationship on this trip when Joe finally tells the narrator, "'We should get married'" (102). She is surprised because he has not yet asked if she loves him, the question she had expected to come first. When she attempts to dissuade him on the grounds that they are already living together, he does not budge. Realizing that he is pushing the issue simply because of her reluctance and distaste for marriage, she says no. Rejecting her reasons for refusing him, he hurls accusations that she does not care about him while she mentally calculates how much money she has for a get away once the trip is over. Refusing to be forced into a marriage predicated on his desire to dominate, she angrily fumes over the games men play with women: "Prove your love, they say. You really want to marry me, let me fuck you instead. You really want to fuck, let me marry you instead. As long as there's a victory. . . " (103). She reasons with herself that "He didn't love me, it was an idea of himself he loved and he wanted someone to join him, anyone would do" (131). Even though she attempts to explain to Joe that she had failed miserably in her previous relationship and that she cannot chance another fiasco, he is unmoved. Therefore, for the remainder of the trip, they remain stalemated on the issue.

Part of the reason the narrator is unable to commit to Joe or any other man is that she has been emotionally destroyed by her former lover, the married art teacher who impregnated her, then insisted on an abortion when she had wanted a marriage. So painful was his treatment of her and the memory of the unwanted abortion that she has created in her mind a kinder version of what actually took place, events which she renders as absolute fact to the reader. To block out the pain of the experience, she represses her guilt, and creates a metaphor for it instead, what Jerome Rosenberg terms a "comforting selective amnesia" (106), in the form of a marriage to her previous lover, the birth of a healthy child, and a subsequent divorce with the father retaining custody. In her guilt over the abortion and fear of her parents' disapproval, she had refused to return home and had sent a postcard informing them of her bogus marriage. Although she feared her parents would never forgive her for what happened, it is actually she who has never forgiven herself for agreeing to the abortion: "Leaving my child, that was the unpardonable sin" (30). Throughout the trip to the lake and the search for her father, she continues to examine her distorted memories of the incident. Even though she has repressed some of the actual memories, she nevertheless suffers the psychic torment and consequences of her ordeal. As a result of the experience, she feels she will never be able to trust words again because her lover had told her he loved her and she is unable to connect the word love with his treatment of her. She has never told Anna or Joe about the baby because to survive the emotional pain over the issue,

> I have to behave as though it doesn't exist, because for me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh canceled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget. (53-54)

When Anna brings up the subject of birth control, the narrator

lapses into a confused memory of her abortion, which she disguises in her mind's eye with the metaphor of giving birth to her child during her made-up marriage. Of the experience, she says, "[T]hey shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and they don't let you see, they don't want you to understand, they want you to believe it's their power, not yours. . . . they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. . . . I won't let them do that to me ever again" (94-95). Even though she cannot remember why her lover/husband had not been there for the process--it had been "his idea, his fault" (95)--she continues to feel the emotional abandonment she had suffered.

Besides the debilitating misery in her personal life, the narrator is extremely anxious over what she sees happening to her native Canada as she travels north toward where she grew up. Already, the term "American" is a dirty word for her and her traveling companions, Anna and David, a married couple, and Joe. They tend to view anything American with distrust and reveal hostile attitudes toward all Americans, called Pigs and "Rotten capitalists bastards" (9), whom they see as crass materialists, exploiters, and destroyers of the primitive wilderness. David, for instance, believes war will eventually break out between Canadian nationalists and the "Yanks" over the American seizure of Canada's abundant supply of water. His theory is that the Americans are running out of clear water and so will attempt to trade Canadian water for "more soapflakes or something" (114). David and his friends see themselves and their country as being sucked up by an entity so ubiquitous that they are powerless to fight it, and rather than become the kind of creative non-victims that Atwood calls for in *Survival*, they prefer to call names and see the problem as too huge to conquer, taking a Position Two victim stance, which is admitting to victimization, but saying it is insoluble.

Their fears are not totally unfounded, of course, and one incident serves to intensify their hostility towards Americans. When the two couples take a canoe trip to another island not far from the narrator's cabin, they come across the carcass of a blue heron hanging grotesquely on a tree by its feet with its wings spread open, "its mashed eye" (137) glaring at the narrator. She is upset by the senseless killing since the bird is not edible, broods over the bird as a "lynch victim" (138), and wonders why someone would string up an innocent bird in such a way:

> To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless; beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. . . . It must have been the Americans. . . (139)

As she thinks about the blue heron later, it becomes a symbol for all victims:

> The innocents get slaughtered because they exist, I thought, there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them, no conscience or piety; for them the only things worthy of life were human, their own kind of human, framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks, laminated. It would have been different in those countries where an animal is the soul of an ancestor or the child of a god, at least they would have felt guilt. (152)

The narrator is in for a big surprise, however, when the two fishermen she has been watching from a distance during their camping trip and on whom she has blamed the murder of the heron, turn out to be Canadians. On first sight of them, the men had greeted them with "teeth bared, friendly as shark" (75). She had been fooled by the American flag on their boat and had taken them for "two irritated-looking business men with pug-dog faces and nifty outfits" (75), the kind of men who "catch more than they can eat and they'd do

it with dynamite if they could get away with it" (75-76).

To the narrator, "guilt glittered on them like tinfoil" (144) as she automatically pictures them as the kind of fishermen who stuff the pontoons of seaplanes with illegal fish, or the kind who build false bottoms to their car to smuggle out two hundred trout on dry ice to America. Even though the narrator and her friends are quick to blame the Americans for the exploitation of Canada and indeed for practically every malaise in their lives, they nevertheless offer no solutions or positive action. According to Francine du Plessix Gray, these protagonists are "decadent Bohemians" and "knee-jerk Canadian nationalists who deplore the 'American capitalistic pig's' encroachment on their wilderness yet have themselves lost all sense of contact with nature" (132). They see themselves as victims, deplore the fact, but refuse to do more than pay lip service to the situation, all the while failing to perceive their own utter estrangement from the wilderness.

According to Margaret Laurence, these symbolic Americans, "new barbarians" (46) whom the protagonists indict, are "what's in store for us, what we are turning into" (SU 153). At one point, the narrator admits the connection in her mind of Americans with all the evils of the world. After she had found out about the war as a child, she saw Hitler as the source of all evil, "the great evil, many-tentacled, ancient and indestructible as the Devil" (154), and she believed that if only he could be destroyed, then everyone would be saved. But now, she ruminates that even though Hitler was gone, "the thing remained" (154). Asking herself whether the Americans are worse than Hitler, she concludes: "It was like cutting up a tapeworm, the pieces grew" (154). As long as she finds someone to blame for the evil she sees around her, she feels absolved from personal responsibility. But thinking about the heron that she had left hanging from the tree, she realizes she has done nothing to prevent its tragic fate:

> I felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it: one of the silent guarded faces in the crowd. The trouble some people have being German, I thought, I have being human. (155)

In a moment of intellectual honesty and clarity, the narrator admits her own small share of guilt for the treatment of the heron, and this recognition brings about a turning point in her life. She begins to see the problem as one involving the refusal of individuals to find a personal set of values. Cut off as they are, both Americans and Canadians, from themselves and from nature, they fail to see the connection between their religious decadence and the cultural disrespect they display (Hinz 27). The narrator sees that "They'd had their chance but they had turned against the gods, and it was time for me to choose sides" (SU 184). She chooses to search for her own personal gods, those marked for her to find by her father in a series of maps and drawings he had left for her.

From this point onward, the book takes a bizarre twist in which the narrator plunges into the realms of the mythical underworld, in what Francine du Plessix Gray terms a "search for religious vision" (132). The journey becomes a transformation, a metamorphosis, according to Marge Piercy, that takes the narrator through the primitive and irrational and inhuman in order that she be born again as a new self (65). Like Marian in *The Edible Woman*, for whom it takes two separate and literal flights on foot to escape her victimization (and a bout with starvation), the narrator in *Surfacing* must undergo literal and symbolic forms of flight before she assimilates the meaning of her experiences.

The first portion of her flight occurs when the narrator is searching for her father and for some explanation for his disappearance. She has found drawings of ancient native pictographs

of gods and sacred rituals that he had been copying from cliff walls in the surrounding lake areas and feels that the drawings are somehow his guide to help her find the primitive places of power. She had noted earlier how her father had always believed that "with the proper guidebooks you could do everything yourself" (41), so she decides that he is leaving the drawings to help her construct her own guidebook. On the day before the boat arrives to retrieve the group, the narrator realizes that she has not found the pictographs thus far because the water level of the lake has been brought up and the pictographs would by now be submerged about twenty feet. Therefore, she realizes she will have to dive under for them. Thus, the dive takes on both a physical and a spiritual significance and ties in to the title of the novel.

In this first climactic episode, the narrator discovers something, not the drawings, but something blurred and drifting toward her that "had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing" (170). Suddenly feeling the cold and death-like grip of the water, she emerges horrified and inwardly hysterical. At first she does not realize that it is her father's body she has found, but believes the thing floating toward her is the body of her dead brother, who she remembers had been saved during his near-drowning incident in childhood. Then she sees it as the fetus of her aborted child: "Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it" (171). For the first time, she forces herself to admit the awful lies she had told to herself and everyone else about the affair, conceding that her memories had been "fraudulent as passports" (171). She tells herself she did it because she could not accept the "mutilation", and that she "needed a different version" (171) of the facts in order to live with herself. Then she recounts the lurid details exactly as they happened and faces up to the fact that "I could have said no but I didn't; that made me one of them too, a

killer" (172-73). Because she had come from parents of "another age, prehistoric, when everyone got married and had a family" (172), she could not face her parents and simply never returned home after the abortion.

But now, putting aside the false memories which had paralyzed her and accepting responsibility for her complicity in the abortion, she surfaces from the dive spiritually renewed. This admission of the painful truth not only heals the narrator, but frees her from the weight of the past. She feels the power of the ancient Indian gods of the water and the shore, gods "unacknowledged or forgotten," she admits, who "did not own salvation but they had once known where it lived and their signs marked the sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth" (173).

This is the first of her mythic adventures in which she departs from the rational world to a source of knowledge and returns enlightened. In this sacred place, she realizes that her father, a scientist and admirer of the eighteenth-century rationalists, had deeply believed in and ingrained in her a strong sense of rationalism, had himself found places and oracles where he could discover his own vision: "He had discovered new places, new oracles, they were things he was seeing the way I had seen, true vision; at the end, after the failure of logic" (173). Discovering her father at this site, says Annis Pratt, the surfacer "absorbs into her own experience the transformation that [her father] achieves" (158), a unification of the physical with the spiritual. These ancient pictographs then are the legacy from her father, the first chapter of her freshly-evolving guidebook, providing her with the knowledge he discovered, that beyond logic lies the true realm of life--the gods and their respect for natural energies.

Next, she is anxious to find some legacy from her mother, for she believes that "the power from my father's intercession wasn't

enough to protect me, it gave only knowledge and there were more gods than his, his were the gods of the head, antlers rooted in the brain. Not only how to see but how to act" (183). Yet without something from her mother, she feels she is "not completed yet" (179). Therefore, when she steps into her old room at the cabin, she senses the power "in my hands and running along my arms" (187) and instinctively knows that what she is looking for is in the scrapbooks of pictures, drawings, and cut-outs that her mother had put together and saved. The "gift" she finds is a loose page, a crayon drawing she had done as a child. On the left side of the paper is a woman with a "round moon stomach" (190) containing a baby that is sitting up inside the mother and gazing out. She identifies the child in the drawing as herself before she was born and remembers thinking that she was able to see out of her mother's womb before birth. The original meaning of the picture is lost to the narrator, just as the exact meaning of the rock paintings have faded into history; however, the drawing now becomes the gift from her mother, which she interprets as an instruction: to become alive again, she must resurrect that part of herself she has killed. She must replace her aborted baby with another, and in doing so give birth to herself as well as to a new life (Rigney 55).

She perceives that to achieve the last full measure of understanding she must go through a "purification process" (Larkin 50), during which she immerses herself in "the other language" (SU 90), the prehistoric language of the natural world. She is ready to add the final chapter to her guidebook, one that involves escape from her companions and an immersion in the wilderness, which Rigney sees as a metaphor for the journey through her subconscious mind " (53). Before the final climactic episode, she brings Joe to the shore of the lake, where they make love and she conceives another baby. During this experience, she can feel her lost child "surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for

so long" (197). This is the moment of purification and unification of the surfacer's divided self, representing more than the lost child's forgiveness of its mother, but her forgiveness of herself and her acceptance of her own guilt. Although some critics question the wisdom (or sanity) of the narrator's inducing Joe to impregnate her, Annis Pratt insists on seeing her action as "a self-actualizing choice" (159), in which she initiates herself into the mysteries of femininity through her mother and becomes pregnant as "part of a process of creative solitude" (159). This time, she tells herself regarding birth, "I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone. . . . The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord. . . it will be covered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words" (197). Her last words reflect her renewed reverence for the natural world as discovered at the pictograph site and her rejection of the impotent gods of society.

Then she escapes by canoe into the wilderness on the day the boat arrives to take the group off the island. She can hear them shouting her name, but her she has entered into a phase from which there is no immediate return. After they have left, she breaks down and cries for the first time in rage and grief for her dead parents and her own refusal to accept their mortality. She realizes she cannot receive the powerful lessons of the gods in a human place and knows she must discover their messages in nature. When she picks up her hairbrush, she feels a surge of fear and knows then that the brush is forbidden and that she "must stop being in the mirror" (213). She looks at herself in the mirror one last time, "Not to see myself, but to see" (213-14), then turns it toward the wall. Following her instincts, she realizes "Everything from history must be eliminated" (215). First, she destroys her drawings for *Quebec Folk Tales* because "this is no longer my future" (215). She rips up her

scrapbooks, even the drawing from her mother and the pictographs from her father, all artifacts from her former life, demolishing everything in the cabin that is breakable. Then, taking only a blanket to cover her "until the fur grows" (216), she abandons her human clothing and the cabin. After a cleansing bath in the lake, she takes stock of what is permissible for her to eat and where she can go. The dock, cabin, and paths are off limits, as is the food in the cabin. Things in tin cans, glass or metal are not allowable. On the first day into her underworld experience she feeds herself with raw food from the garden, which she digs up with her fingers. At night she makes herself a hollow lair near a woodpile and sleeps "like a cat" in relays (217) with the blanket over her.

The next morning when she wakes with "floating shark stomach" (218) and heads toward the garden, she discovers it is no longer licit for her to go into the fence where the plants grow. She understands that "To talk with them I must approach the condition they themselves have entered; in spite of my hunger I must resist the fence, I'm too close now to turn back" (219). She spends the day searching for raspberries and edible mushrooms. She feels dizzy and sick and thinks of the baby growing inside her. In her hallucinatory state, she sees mystical visions of the forest leaping upward, "enormous, the way it was before they cut it. . . everything is made of water, even the rocks" (220). During this experience, the Surfacer literally "transmogrifies" into nature; she is human, animal, tree, and place (St. Andrews 104): "I lean against a tree. I am a tree leaning" (SU 221). Then she hears the jays her mother used to feed near the cabin and finds her mother there in her old leather jacket, looking thirty years younger, with the birds perched on her. Her mother seems to look at her "as though she knows something is there but she can't quite see it" (221). Suddenly the jays fly into the trees and her mother is gone, transmogrified into one of the birds.

The "Americans" arrive the next day by boat, looking for her. She

fears that if they find her naked and "ownerless" (223), running around with only a blanket, they will take her, perhaps shoot or bludgeon her and hang her up by the feet from a tree the way they had hung the heron. To her, "They are evolving, they are halfway to machine, the leftover flesh atrophied and diseased" (224). She manages to elude them again even though she sees Joe among the party. Wandering, she sees a vision of her father, but calling his name, she realizes, "it's not my father. . . .it is what my father has become" (227, 228), a part of nature. It gazes at her with yellow wolf eyes, neither approving or disapproving of her: "it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself" (228).

The underworld experience comes to a close the next morning when the narrator awakes, knowing the gods have retreated back into the earth and the air. The rules are over and she can go anywhere she wants--the cabin, the garden, or the paths. She returns to the cabin and to reality, knowing that she cannot survive there by herself:

> No gods to help me now, they're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus. . . . They'll never appear to me again, I can't afford it: from now on I'll have to live in the usual way, defining them by their absence. (231)

Although the gods have retreated, they have left her with their wisdom. She has reached a peaceful reconciliation with her parents, appreciating her father for "protecting both us and himself, in the midst of war and in a poor country, the effort it must have taken to sustain his illusions of reason and benevolent order" (231). And of her mother, she appreciates her "collecting the seasons and the weather. . ., the meticulous records . . . the pain and isolation and whatever it was she was fighting against, something in a vanished history, I can never know" (231). She realizes her parents are out of reach now; "they belong to themselves, more than ever" (231). When

she turns the mirror around again, what greets her is an image that is "neither animal or human" (231), with deep eye sockets, dirty blanket, and straw-filled hair. She laughs at her reflection.

With sanity and a new resolve, she carefully looks at the shattered pieces of her life and assesses how she can put them back together:

> This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. . . . The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death. (233)

This is the most intense point of the narrator's recognition because with this statement, she vows to change her life. Admitting her former errors had been an important step, as had been the finding of her personal gods and making peace with her parents. With this final assertion, however, she is ready for moral action. When Joe arrives with the boat once more, she knows they will have to talk, that "it's necessary, the intercession of words" (234). She must give their relationship a chance for now because she realizes, "he isn't an American. . . he isn't anything, he is only half formed, and for that reason I can trust him" (235).

It may be tempting to examine the narrator's actions as some critics have done and to declare her mad, incapable of making any rational decisions. But if this is so, hers is a "truth-telling 'madness'" according to the 1975 feminist critiques by Karen F. Stein and Annette Kolodny (McCombs *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood* 9). When the narrator returns from her ritual descent into the underworld, she is a spiritually-enlightened woman who has achieved a number of insights: she has come to terms with the death of her parents, with the abortion of her child, with the essential

imperfections in relationships and in people's ability to communicate. Most importantly, she refuses to be victimized in the future in her job, her relationships, and even in her own country. Rather than sit back and feel helpless over the exploitation of Canada, she knows she must take a role in its preservation: "[The] Americans exist, they're advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied" (230). In her new mode of being, she fits into Position Three on Atwood's chart of victims outlined in *Survival*, which means that she acknowledges her victimization (by men, friends, employers, and the Americans), but she repudiates the victim role. As the novel closes, she knows she has choices and is thinking about a plan of action. As Atwood says of the narrator, "You could say that the woman in *Surfacing* performs a typical act of Canadian heroism. She works out her connection with the wilderness and with her past, and she *survives*" (*Malahat Review* 13). Some critics question what will happen to the narrator once she returns: Will she and Joe get married? What is she going to do? But Atwood insists, "I fill in what I know, and after that anybody's guess is as good as mine" (12). Suffice it to say that the surfacer survives her ordeal and reconciles the split in her divided self. Furthermore, she learns that only by making valid connections with the gods, the land, and their innermost selves can individuals reach wholeness.

In addition to assimilating the legacies of her parents and emerging from her quest with insight into her spiritual needs, the surfacer must also learn practical lessons about love if she is to find harmony in a relationship. Her previous relationship with her art teacher and her current precarious relationship with Joe leave her unsure of herself and untrusting of others. By observing the relationship of David and Anna through the course of the week, the narrator finds that married partners, if their own spiritual lives are

hollow, can be as brutal and damaging to one another as her first lover had been to her. David and Anna, who are perceived by the narrator as the trip begins as having some "special method, formula" (43) for their nine-year union, reveal themselves over the week to be "sexual robots," "casualties of the urban, technological society," and emotional cannibals with "a sado-masochism rivaled only by the characters in an Albee play" (St. Andrews 91). For this couple, spiritual and psychological renewal on this trip are impossible because like Peter in *The Edible Woman*, both Anna and David have embraced the image offered to them by the false commercial gods. They become victims themselves as "microcosmic representatives" of the technological generation (98).

Anna represents the fading fairy-tale princess whose beauty she thought would capture and hold the prince, but when the narrator sees Anna for the first time without her makeup, her face looks "curiously battered, like a worn doll's" (48). So foreign is the princess role to the narrator, who simply cannot fit into it, she is unable to conceive or design one suitable for the pages of *Quebeck Folk Tales*. Yet the image is demanded by Mr. Percival as the one most likely to appeal to and sell to the public. Her princesses come out "emaciated [with] fashion-model torso and infantile face" (60) because she has no true models to inspire her. The narrator knows "this isn't a country of princesses" (61), yet the pressure to live up to the culturally-approved ideal is pervasive. Anna, for instance, has attempted to make herself into the image that has been her model since childhood. "'I thought I was really a princess and I'd end up living in a castle'" (65), she says as she peers into the mirror, blotting and smoothing her face, but now she sees the illusion behind the myth: "'They shouldn't let kids have stuff like that'" (65). Even so, she clings to the illusions that go along with her image of the world because she lacks the insight and fortitude to cast aside a life's worth of destructive conditioning. Her generation has been

raised to believe in "Love without fear, sex without risk" (94), but her experience and the narrator's are contrary to the myth. In spite of this, David and Anna both play out an emotionally devastating game that prevents them from experiencing closeness or trust. Even sex, which offers the promise of a true union, becomes for each a psychically separate function, with Anna during the act in "a desperate beggar's whine. . . praying to herself. . . as if David wasn't there at all" (97). Disconnected as she and David are, she nevertheless uses her body as a weapon to keep him entrapped: "[S]he was desperate, her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life" (184).

Since the promise of sexual bliss fails to hold the couple together, they both look elsewhere for sex as a way emoionally to torture and take revenge upon each other. David, who admires his own honesty and calls jealousy "bourgeois," always tells Anna of his exploits, even teasing and flirting with other women in front of her, while Anna is more secretive about her extramarital activities. Anna admits to the narrator that David would like all people to be swingers "'and share it around'" (117), and during their stay on the island, David does, in fact, attempt to have sex with the narrator. However, Anna has already warned her, "'[I]f he grabs you or anything it won't have much to do with you, it's all about me really'" (118).

Gloria Onley sees Anna as a woman "locked into her Playboy centerfold stereotype, her soul trapped in a gold compact, her capacity for love locked into a sado-masochistic pattern" (75). After her week in the wilderness, she and David have tortured each other, but they have learned nothing. As Anna prepares to leave the island, she takes out the gold compact "runs her fingertips around the corners of her mouth . . . then she unswivels a pink stick and dots her cheeks and blends them, changing her shape, performing the only magic left to her" (201). She does not even mention the incident of the previous day when David had humiliated her in front of Joe, and

the narrator looks at them and perceives that "The machine is gradual, it takes a little of you at a time, it leaves the shell" (202).

A brittle shell or veneer is all that remains of Anna's sadistic husband. The narrator clearly defines David as a "Secondhand American," and an "imposter, a pastiche," who is "infested, garbled" and for whom "it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true" (182). For the trip, he and Joe rent a video camera and make a film called "Random Samples," in which he and Joe, as "new Renaissance Men" (6), capture on film the random sights that appeal to them. But the things David captures are images of death and decadence, all revealing his lack of taste and values. For instance, he captures the murdered heron on film as well as some stuffed and splayed moose on top of a restaurant. Then he callously forces Anna to disrobe before Joe on the dock because "'we need a naked lady. . . . with big tits and a big ass'" (160, 61). When Anna refuses, he threatens to remove her clothes himself. Finally in tears, she capitulates, then jumps into the lake to escape the two men. His constant belittling keeps her unbalanced and defensive. She is truly frightened when on the overnight camp-out she discovers that she has left her makeup at the cabin. Wearing makeup is one of David's "'little set of rules'" (145). The problem, says Anna, is "'[H]e keeps changing them so I'm never sure'" (145).

Anna's statement here is perceptive because her prince is not faring well in the battle of the sexes either. He is balding and covers his bare spot with bangs because he too fears losing his looks to age. Also, of his treatment of Anna, he believes that she "'asks for it, she makes me do it'" (164) that she had "manipulated" (165) him into marriage. How she does this is unclear since he believes, "'She's [so] dumb. . . she moves her lips when she watches the TV'" (165) and "'What I married was a pair of boobs'" (165). His blaming Anna for having tricked him into marriage is roughly parallel to his

blaming the Americans for every thing that is wrong in Canada. He fails to admit his own complicity in the victimization he believes he suffers and in fact enjoys playing the victim role.

If David and Anna emerge from the week's trials as mere shells, the narrator and Joe do not because they see the effects of living by false values in the couple's lives. In contrast to Anna's gazing into her compact in an attempt to perform some kind of magic, the surfacer stares into the mirror near the end of the novel at her tattered image and dirt-streaked face, seeing herself as a possibility for "A new kind of centerfold" (232), one who resists the kind of assimilation that has spiritually annihilated Anna and David and left Anna with no defenses against aging or against denigration by her husband. And there is hope too for the unformed Joe, as the narrator molds him like a potter into a thinking and feeling man, smoothing out discordant mutant qualities.

Not only has Anna provided the surfacer with a basis for studying what she wants of a love relationship, she also gives her the opportunity to look closely at the thing called female friendship. Most of Atwood's novels have sister or friend figures, who often function to help the protagonist even if the protagonist herself fails to recognize their value (Rigney 10); however, since her characters are fully human and therefore flawed, they can be as destructive as men. Such is the case with Anna in *Surfacing*, who begins the novel as the narrator's "best" friend, a woman she has known only two months. Anna is friendly and chummy as long as the narrator offers no perceived threat. But as the week on the island passes and Anna senses that David is attracted to the narrator, she becomes hostile. And when she discovers that David has made sexual advances toward the narrator, she takes out her hard feelings on the narrator rather than on her husband. She feels cheapened by the fact that the narrator refused her husband because to do so had reflected badly on Anna. Also, Anna shows little sense of loyalty toward her so-called

best friend, by having a sexual liaison with Joe the day before the group is to leave the island. And when the narrator tosses the film containing the nude coverage of her friend into the lake, Anna repays her by immediately telling the men what she has done because her loyalties clearly lie with the men. When a conflict involves the choice between defending a female friend and remaining loyal to David, she will choose sides with David no matter what the issue.

Such are the destructive sexual politics and lack of loyalty Atwood explores in women's relationships. Treacherous as Anna is in *Surfacing*, however, her anti-feminist behavior is not only rivaled but surpassed in *Cat's Eye,* Atwood's seventh novel. The story of Elaine Risley's victimization by her so-called best friends is so intense in its nightmarish quality and its message about the way some women treat one another that several critics have noted Conradian undertones throughout the novel. Richard Bautch, for instance, discusses how Conrad saw as his task the weaning of people from their illusions during the time when British Imperialism was crumbling (437). The crisis of confidence that resulted from the falling of an ethos remains, says Bautch, but through the generations, it has become more difficult to define. One way to pin it down, Atwood seems to be saying in *Cat's Eye*, is to return to one's childhood, to one's "primal scenes of instruction" (437) for understanding and insight.

The protagonist of the novel has the perfect opportunity to explore the heart of darkness when she confronts her tortured past in the present, much in the same vein of the diver in *Surfacing.* Elaine, a fragmented but successful painter in her fifties, returns to Toronto for a retrospective of her work at a local gallery. Telling her story in first person as she looks back on the events and places that have haunted her, she finally comes to terms with the painful

events that have shaped her life, her personality, and her art. The first paragraph emphasizes the narrator's interest in the possibility that time can be made to bend, to double back upon itself: "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). What Elaine does in a series of flashbacks in *Cat's Eye* is to bend her own personal time continuum in such a way as to allow her to go back to and "fill in the black square of time, go back to see what's in it" (113). As she looks into the time of her repressed past "down through it, like water" (3), she finds a compelling story emerging: "Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that. . . . Nothing goes away" (3).

In the early portion of the book, Elaine tells of her innocent and carefree childhood, during which she and her brother Stephen grew up in a rather nomadic manner with their parents. Her father was a forest entomologist who traveled through Canada, bringing his family with him and living in logging camps and cheap lodges. Together the two children found enough mystery and delight in the forests to keep themselves entertained. Even the world war that was going on abroad seemed distant and nebulous to the young Risley siblings, who grew up during these years with no roots or friends of their own age. Thinking back on her earliest years, Elaine remembers, "Until we moved to Toronto I was happy" (22).

But when Elaine's father accepts a position as a university professor and the family settles into a raw, unfinished suburb of Toronto, Elaine misses the "old rootless life of impermanence and safety" (34). Here, the naive young girl finds herself in a city where the children are light-years ahead of her in the intricacies of social interplay. To the innocent Elaine, the neighborhood children are knowing and sophisticated; they awaken in her the desire to be one of them, to be accepted. But at school, Elaine realizes she is different from everyone else and that the rules she and Stephen had

lived by no longer exist. The school, for instance, segregates girls and boys into separate areas. Now Elaine cannot talk to her brother because "Boys get teased for having younger sisters. . . . For me to contact him, or even to call him by name would be disloyal. I understand these things, and do my best" (50). Therefore, she is "left to the girls," even though she is "not used to girls, or familiar with their customs" (50). Although she understands instinctively the "unspoken rules of the boys," with the girls she senses that she is "always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder" (50). The Risleys' self-sufficient wanderings had not prepared Elaine for the brutal initiation she must undergo, and her abrupt entry into their world makes her easy prey for their predatory instincts.

For a while, the naturally sturdy and tomboyish Elaine immerses herself wonderingly into the new girlhood culture of middle-class, suburban Toronto. She and her friends get together and cut out pictures of frying pans and other domestic bric-a-brac from the *Eaton Catalogue*, or go about each other's houses comparing furniture, clothes, and household habits. She begins to want braids, a dressing gown, and her own purse. Her first friend Carol marvels that the Risleys do not attend church and that they eat off a card table. In the beginning, these eccentricities make her family members seem like "exotic specialties" and their family customs "the antics of some primitive tribe" (52).

With these first impressions revealing a child who is frightened but eager to fit into her new environment, Atwood skillfully weaves back and forth through the past and present to reveal the adult Elaine, a woman crippled by self-doubt and anxiety. Her arrival in Toronto for a retrospective gives her a chance to show off to her old hometown, but a curiously ominous temper pervades her description of the city. She finds it "Malicious, grudging, vindictive, implacable"

(14), and a place in which "In my dreams of this city I am always lost" (14). She tells of her success as a painter, of her satisfaction with her second husband, Ben, and their two well-adjusted daughters, her pleasant home. But as she walks about her old hometown before the retrospective, "I've started to chew my fingers again" and "I descend. . . . I am dragged downward, into the layers of this place as into liquefied mud. . . . I hate this city" (13). Although Elaine has achieved professional success and purports to have a satisfying marriage, "There are days when I can hardly make it out of bed. . . . I feel I am without worth, that nothing I can do is of any value, least of all to myself" (43). These first glimpses of Toronto trigger her old images of worthlessness and the memory of Cordelia, Elaine's so-called best friend, a destructive alter-ego or "evil muse" (Grace "Theory and Practice" 137) who nearly consumes her before Elaine finds the strength to resist.

Cordelia is the third friend Elaine makes after she moves to Toronto, joining the group consisting of Elaine, Carol, and Grace Smeath. Being a year older than the other three girls, Cordelia is quick to establish herself as the leader of the group. She works herself into the confidence of Elaine through a pattern of intimidation and reconciliation. On their first meeting, Cordelia establishes a tone that repels Elaine, then draws her in:

> "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 squooshy kind, like peanut butter." This time her voice is confiding, as if she's talking about something intimate that only she and I know about and agree on. She creates a circle of two, takes me in. (75)

Aware of her social and material inferiority to Cordelia once she visits her friend's two story house with its powder room and display of Swedish glass, Elaine looks to her friend to teach her the things

she needs to know, to show her how to become one of the girls. Each visit to the house reveals a strange and wonderful world with older sisters and a cleaning lady. Perdie and Mirrie, Cordelia's two older, "gifted" sisters, who take ballet and play the viola, further erode Cordelia's own feelings of low self-esteem. When Elaine asks Cordelia if she too is gifted, her friend merely puts her tongue in the corner of her mouth and turns away "as if she's concentrating on something else" (77). Although the older sisters get away with most things, Cordelia "is less agile at this" (77). "'I'm disappointed in you,'" Mummie tells Cordelia as she threatens to have their father settle unpleasant business (77).

Cordelia learns to participate in power struggles early in her childhood as all three daughters vie for their father's attention and approbation. His influence is such that "He can make you feel that what he thinks of you matters, because it will be accurate, but that what you think of him is of no importance" (267). The less-adept Cordelia is so frightened of not pleasing her father that she becomes "dithering" and "fumble-footed" (268) in his presence. Rather, instead of pleasing him, "nothing she can do or say will ever be enough, because she is somehow the wrong person" (268). Therefore, Cordelia develops the habit in childhood of digging gigantic holes in the ground surrounding her freshly-built home in order to escape her father, who demeans his daughter with remarks like, "'Wipe that smirk off your face'" (271).

But the child Elaine is too young to understand the torment and devaluation that Cordelia suffers at home and therefore fails to see that when Cordelia demands the same "'Wipe that smirk off your face,'" she is merely projecting her own shame and vulnerability onto Elaine (McCombs, "Contrary Rememberings" 16). Her psychological terrorism of Elaine variously includes acts of cruelty, rejection, exclusion, reconciliation, blackmail, and abandonment.

One of the early instances occurs when Elaine is eight years old, playing dress-up with the girls. Elaine is supposed to be Mary, Queen of Scotts, already headless, as they throw her into the cold, dim hole in Cordelia's yard at dusk. Already, Elaine has become the complicity victim in the group. She lies there waiting for permission to emerge from the hole, but the girls leave her until she finally becomes terrified. When they return and allow her to exit the hole, she feels "sadness, a sense of betrayal" (112). Undaunted, the children begin another game.

When Elaine turns nine, the girls' play becomes more cruel and vague. For instance, they sometimes punish Elaine by not speaking to her. It may be something she has said wrong although they do not tell her what it is. Cordelia tells Elaine to think about it and when she has guessed the right answer, they will speak to her again. Elaine complies because, "All of this is for my own good, because they are my best friends and they want to help me improve" (123). When Elaine's father walks into the room during one of these sessions, Cordelia decides to make up because Elaine had kept their "game" secret. She "puts an arm around me, gives me a little squeeze, a squeeze of complicity, of instruction. Everything will be all right as long as I sit still, say nothing, reveal nothing. I will be saved then, I will be acceptable once more. I smile, tremulous with relief, with gratitude" (124).

When the girls meet about Elaine, they decide she is "just not measuring up, although they are giving me every chance" (124). She knows she must do better, but better at what? Therefore, Elaine begins to worry about how she talks, the expression on her face, and what she wears, all the while clinging to these friends because they promise to help her improve. The more Cordelia tears down her self-image, the more she needs them. Testing her power, Cordelia attempts to victimize Carol with the same "improvement plan" (128) she uses on Elaine, by walking ahead on the way home from school

and by calling her degrading names, but Carol quickly becomes overcome and breaks down, getting carried away with her crying so that she draws attention to their activity. This response makes her undependable as a victim for their childish torture techniques because "she can be pushed just so far, she has a weak sense of honor" (128). By breaking down and refusing to participate, even threatening to expose their behavior, Carol unconsciously creates a strategy of self-defense that excludes her from Cordelia's cruel victimization. However, Elaine's and Cordelia's stronger bond prevents them from breaking out of their sadistic and masochistic pattern, in part because of a perceived, shared "wildness" that links the girls, putting them "in opposition to the 'tameness' of middle-class culture represented by Carol Campbell and Grace Smeath" (Banerjee 516).

During this time, Elaine develops a number of self-destructive behaviors that signal her diminishing strength and desire to escape the taunting of the girls. For instance, she begins to peel the skin off her feet at night, by biting and then pulling the skin off in narrow strips. She gnaws the cuticles off her fingers, leaving welts of oozing flesh and chews her hair. The pain, "something immediate. . . . something to hold on to" (120) acts to ground her in reality. Another part of her fragmented self, on the other hand, is looking for ways to escape it. Watching the bread in the toaster, she is tempted to put her finger on the red-hot grid (126); another time, she wonders what would happen if she stuck her hand through the washing wringer because even though it would hurt, "there's something compelling about it" (130). Her attempts at self-mutilation are nothing more than a cry for help and attention, "ways of delaying time, slowing it down, so I won't have to go out through the kitchen door" (126), but when her mother says nothing, she resorts to more glaring methods. She claims illness to stay home because "Once I'm outside the house there is no getting away from them" (127). They insult her, snap

orders at her, comment on the lunch she has, how she holds her sandwich, how she chews, and report to Cordelia about her classroom behavior. Since Elaine's first feeble attempts at self-preservation fail, she resorts to stronger measures. She tells the girls she cannot come out to play because she has to help her mother. When that strategy fails also, she begins throwing up every day at school and is allowed to go home where she temporarily feels, "safe, small, wrapped in my illness" (147). The vomiting soon gives way to fainting. At first the girls are sympathetic, but later it begins to happen on a regular basis and Elaine becomes known as "the girl who faints" (185). So hopeless does her situation seem to her at nine years old, that she starts thinking about jumping off a bridge or finding ways to poison herself.

Grace Smeath's offer at her mother's behest to take Elaine to church with the Smeath family on Sundays provides a way for Elaine to assimilate into the local culture and to have some time alone with Grace. The idea of attending church is a new one for Elaine, whose father had never believed in "brainwashing children," and who blames religion for "a lot of wars and massacres. . . as well as bigotry and intolerance" (100). Elaine begins to enjoy the outings although she senses Mrs. Smeath's smugness and her disapproval of Elaine for failing to bring other family members into the fold. As eager to please at Sunday school as she is with her friends at school, Elaine quickly learns the names of all the books in the Bible in order, the Ten Commandments, The Lord's Prayer, and the Beatitudes. When Elaine bows her head to pray, she feels "suffused with goodness. . . included, taken in. God loves me, whoever he is" (104). In spite of Elaine's amazing erudition, Grace reports to Cordelia that Elaine "'didn't stand up straight in Sunday school yesterday. . . . She was a goody-goody'" (131). And Elaine believes each of these comments: "my shoulders sag, my spine crumples, I

exude the wrong kind of goodness; I see myself shambling crookedly" (131). She wonders if Grace minds that she made a perfect score on the Bible quiz and the next week puts five wrong answers deliberately.

Elaine becomes a regular part of the Smeath family on Sundays until she inadvertently overhears Mrs. Smeath discuss her with Aunt Mildred one afternoon. As Elaine emerges from the cellar where she and Grace have been playing, she hears the former missionary call Elaine a heathen who will learn the Bible, then "go right back" (192) to the way she was before. She wonders, however, if perhaps the girls are not being too hard on Elaine. Mrs. Smeath disagrees, "'What can you expect, with that family?. . . . It's God's punishment. . . . It serves her right'" (193). Elaine is stung by the unfairness and cruelty of the adults. She thinks of the temperance essay she had researched and written, the psalms she can recite by whole chapters, and the hymns she has memorized. Even more, she realizes Mrs. Smeath knows how the girls have been treating Elaine and has allowed, even condoned, it. She feels waves of shame and a new antipathy. She hates Mrs. Smeath "because what I thought was a secret, something going on among girls, among children, is not one. It has been discussed before, and tolerated. Mrs. Smeath had known and approved" (193). From here on, Elaine loses faith in God, who she believes is on Mrs. Smeath's side. She begins to see him as "something huge, hard, inexorable, faceless" (194).

She considers Jesus also, but feels no sense of comfort from him either because against Mrs. Smeath and God, "[Jesus] can do nothing, because God is bigger" (194). However, a picture she finds on the ground one day captivates her. The title of it is Our Lady of Perpetual Help. She assumes the lady is the Virgin Mary, with a long robe, a crown and a halo, her hands outstretched and her heart on the outside of her chest. She quickly discards the picture because the girls are curious about what she has found, but decides to "do

something dangerous, rebellious, perhaps even blasphemous" (196): she decides to pray to the Virgin Mary since she can no longer depend on God. At home, she kneels in her pajamas and thinks of Mary, "I want her to help me or at least show me that she can hear me, but I don't know what to say" (197). Therefore, her prayers are "wordless, defiant, dry-eyed, desperate, without hope" (197).

During this period of withering doubt and defeat, Elaine gets little help from her mother. While Elaine is painfully learning the lessons of assimilation in suburban Toronto, her mother, wearing boots, slacks, and man's jacket is busy stamping through the yard to plant a garden. An unconventional woman who eschews traditional domestic, spiritual, or feminine interests, she is unable to initiate her daughter into the subtleties of adolescence because she simply has no clue how to handle the problem herself. At one point, Elaine thinks back on her mother's lack of reaction:

> She must have realized what was happening to me, or that something was. Even toward the beginning she must have noted my silences, my bitten fingers, the dark scabs on my lips where I'd pulled off patches of the skin. If it were happening now, to a child of my own, I would know what to do. But then? There were fewer choices, and a great deal less was said. (160)

Elaine's mother's advice to fight back with the age-old: "Sticks and stones will break my bones but names well never hurt me" (167) proves as feeble as Elaine's attempts to escape the girls. When Elaine protests to her mother that these girls are not her enemies, but her friends, her mother exhorts her, "'stand up for yourself. . . . have more backbone'" (167-68). Rather than easing her daughter's fears, her mother only adds to Elaine's sense of shame and helplessness: "What is happening to me is my own fault, for not having more backbone" (168). At the same time, her defeated mother

admits, "'I wish I knew what to do,'" (168), leaving Elaine with the painful knowledge that in this situation, her mother is powerless to help her.

All the girls in Elaine's group feel a similar reticence in talking to their mothers. Of their relationships with their mothers, Elaine reflects, "There's a great deal they don't say. Between us and them is a gulf, an abyss. . . . The world is dirty, no matter how much they clean, and we know they will not welcome our grubby little questions" (98). Therefore when Cordelia tells her friends that men have carrots between their legs and that some are pierced and have rings on them, and that they plant seeds in women's stomachs, the girls are outraged that they could have been produced by such an act. They cannot imagine their parents mating and decide that when boys put their tongues in girls' mouths to kiss them, it is "Just to be repulsive, of course. Just to see what you would do" (99). Without real relationships with their mothers, the four girls drift into their own world of ignorance and isolation.

Not surprisingly, when Elaine departs with her family for a summer of field work, much as in their old nomadic days, she begins to heal both physically and emotionally. She finds that her throat is no longer tight, that her teeth are no longer clenched, that her fingers and feet are growing new skin. As if given permission, she begins to dream again. However, just before the family returns to Toronto when Elaine is ten, she becomes stiff as her defensive mechanisms begin to rise. Unable to resist Cordelia's power, Elaine falls immediately into the old pattern with her. Whereas before the summer, her friend would alternate between kindness and malice, with periods of indifference, "now she's harsher, more relentless. It's as if she's driven by the urge to see how far she can go. She's backing me toward an edge, like the edge of a cliff: one step back, another step, and I'll be over and falling" (165). Finally, the girls push Elaine so far during a walk late one freezing evening that a

climax occurs, nearly killing Elaine and drawing their evil victimization to an end.

The incident begins on one of Cordelia's "friendly days" (198) with an exchange much like countless others the girls have made. Elaine, Cordelia, Carol, and Grace are playing on the way home from school when Cordelia slips and falls on some gravel. Thinking she had done it on purpose the way she had just fallen into the snow and made snow angels, the girls begin laughing. When they see that the fall had been an accident and Cordelia is in a rage, the girls apologize and back away from her baleful glare. Then Cordelia grabs the blue knitted cap off Elaine's head and tosses it over the bridge into the ravine below, demanding that Elaine retrieve it, even though all the girls are forbidden from going into the area under the bridge because that is "where the bad men are" (200). Hesitating for a moment and weighing the consequences, Elaine dutifully follows Cordelia's orders because as she has stated before, "They are my friends. . . my best friends. I have never had any before and I'm terrified of losing them" (127). Cordelia promises forgiveness if Elaine will go down into the ravine area and tells her to count to one hundred before coming back up. But when Elaine spots her hat on the ice over the creek and steps out to reach for it, the ice breaks and she crashes in up to her waist. She looks up for help, but the girls have abandoned her, leaving her to get out on her own.

Unable to move, she realizes she will die soon if she does not extricate herself from the frozen stream. The "cold and peaceful" water that "comes straight from the cemetery, from the graves and their bones. . . . water made from the dead people, dissolved and clear" (201) provides a moment of temptation to Elaine, who realizes that if she gives in, she will be "a dead person, peaceful and clear, like them" (201). Finally she pulls herself from the water and collapses on the bank of the ravine, drained of strength and the will

to survive. The pain disappears as she succumbs to the whispering of the dead people, who tell her to *hush*.

Then a figure appears to her from the bridge, whom she identifies as the Virgin Mary that she had seen in the picture and had begun praying to. In a long cloak and a dark hood, the figure descends from the bridge, melting through the railing and speaking to Elaine softly and lovingly. As she extends her arms toward the injured child, Elaine feels a surge of happiness. The Virgin reveals a red heart through her cloak, glowing like a neon coal. She tells Elaine, "*You can go home now. . . . It will be all right*" (203). Knowing that "she came to get me. . . She didn't want me freezing in the snow" (204), Elaine feels enveloped in a warm, healing wind that helps her move out of the ravine. Elaine later identifies the apparition or savior-figure in a painting as "the Virgin of Lost Things" (430). Larger than the other paintings at Elaine's retrospective showing, this one, titled *Unified Field Theory*, shows a woman in black with a hood or veil against the backdrop of the sky: "the universe, in its incandescence and darkness" (430). She is positioned atop the railing of the bridge and holds an oversized cat's eye marble, leftover talisman of Elaine's tortured past. Although the young Elaine identifies her as the Virgin Mary she had seen in the picture, the mature artist broadens her identity and imbues her with a number of mythic functions, those of "witch, goddess, Virgin and seer. . . source of mystery, threat, comfort, and power, a beneficient muse. . . a mother and a mirror of the psyche" (Grace "Theory and Practice" 137). Even through her difficult first marriage, Elaine had continued to call on the Virgin Mary as a subject of art and source of comfort, using her art to heal and to sustain her with creative energy.

Somehow, the vision of Virgin Mary descending from the bridge, enveloping the child Elaine in love, and telling her everything will be all right gives her the courage and faith in herself to save herself from freezing and to stand up to the girls. After a couple of days at

home, she returns to school where she finds her friends polite and distant. Soon, however, as Cordelia attempts to pull her victim into the old pattern of abuse, a new reserve and indifference assert themselves in Elaine:

> "I think Elaine should be punished for telling on us, don't you?'
>
> "I didn't tell," I say. I no longer feel the sinking in my gut, the tearfulness that such a false accusation would once have produced. My voice is flat, calm, reasonable.
>
> "Don't contradict me," Cordelia says. "Then how come your mother phoned our mothers?"
>
> "Yeah, how come?" says Carol.
>
> "I don't know and I don't care," I say. I'm amazed at myself.
>
> "You're being insolent," says Cordelia. "Wipe that smirk off your face."
>
> I am still a coward, still fearful; none of that has changed. But I turn and walk away from her. It's like stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up. And it does. I see that I don't have to do what she says, and worse and better, I've never had to do what she says. (207)

Being able to face up to Cordelia just this once gives Elaine the strength to cut off the systematic abuse and defilement she has suffered for the past several years. In addition, with her fear of Cordelia evaporating with each new refusal to cooperate in her own victimization, Elaine begins to see their relationship in a clearer way. She realizes that Cordelia's actions all this time have been an acting out of what she sees at home: "It's an imitation, it's acting. . . .an impersonation of someone much older. . . . a game. . . . It was always a game and I have been fooled" (207). In addition, she realizes for the first time, "They are not my best friends or even my

friends. . . . I am free" (207).

Even though Elaine is only ten when she comes to this startling recognition of truth, the moment echoes those in *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, in which Marian and the surfacer staunchly put an end to their victimization and immediately experience renewal and insight. As their stories draw to a close, they face their world with a resolve to be victim no longer. This scene in *Cat's Eye*, climactic and satisfying as it is, indeed proves to be a turning point: Elaine finds new friends in school, excels in her school work, and thrives once more. But the specter of her past remains with her, the scars deeply imbedded on her subconscious. Whereas in the former two novels, in which the reader presumes that the protagonists' new self-knowledge and strength provide them with the insight they need to move into healthier ways of being, such is not the case with Elaine, whose forceful defeat of her antagonistic friends takes place only halfway through the novel. The full effects of the childhood disaster and the resulting misogyny and nihilism on Elaine's part do not show themselves fully until she confronts the repressed memories of the events during her return trip to Toronto in her fifties. Whereas the surfacer begins to heal the instant she reconciles her past with her present, Elaine at ten years old lacks the tools or the maturity to assimilate her experiences. It is enough for her at the moment to develop a self-preservation deep inside which prevents her from being victimized again by her so-called friends.

The new Elaine, with sharp perception and cool detachment, observes the hatred of her former friends as she completely ignores them, but she is also aware that their need to bully her sprang from their own sagging self-images. However, once Elaine has defeated her abusers, who hang around the edges of her life, "enticing, jeering, growing paler and paler every day, less and less substantial" (208), she develops a new core that is hard, like "a kernel of glass"

(208). Cordelia and Grace graduate and go elsewhere; Carol moves away, and Elaine hardly notices these changes. When Elaine's mother refers to "'That bad time you had'" (215), her daughter is puzzled because she has repressed the memory of that period. She sees herself as "happy as a clam," but at the same time, "hard shelled, firmly closed" (215).

The last half of the novel delivers in more or less chronological order the continuation of Elaine's childhood, although in less detail, her unhealthy affair with an older drawing instructor in college, her marriage to Jon, a fellow artist, her attempted suicide, her divorce, the gradual emergence of Elaine as a painter, and her final coming to terms with her past. Most important, however, is the description of Elaine's high school years when she and Cordelia have become friends again. The two girls resume their friendship following Cordelia's expulsion from her private girls' school for drawing a penis on a bat.

This period counterposes the rise in popularity and power of Elaine to the pathetic decline of Cordelia. Under a veneer of ice and indifference, Elaine befriends her old nemesis although the two girls, on the surface, have little in common. Cordelia, who wears make up and smokes, likes to "pinch" things from stores. Having failed her last year at school, she and Elaine are now in the same grade. As "each other's mirroring, complementary, and sometimes darker Others" (McCombs "Contrary Rememberings" 16), both girls fall into an easy repartee based on their mutual desire to look down upon everyone else and to push the limits of the socially acceptable. One of their favorite activities is to verbally attack the Smeaths, something immensely satisfying to Elaine: "The Smeaths in our rendition of them are charmless, miserly, heavy as dough, boring as white margarine. . . . We ridicule their piety, their small economies, the size of their feet . . . . This for me is a deeply satisfying game. I

can't account for my own savagery" (247). According to Chinmoy Bannerjee, both girls are caught in "a subversive intimacy against the repressive codes of middle-class propriety and femininity" (516). In their mutual disregard for a patriarchal world that has failed to meet their emotional needs, they make what they consider to be "witty, sarcastic remarks to each other, about the other kids at the school, about the teachers" (CE 222). Elaine develops a mean mouth and notices that the more she snubs her mates at school, the more popular she becomes "on the surface" (252). Even so, her friends learn to avoid her potential abuse: "I know where the weak spots are. . . . I walk the halls surrounded by an aura of potential verbal danger, and am treated with caution" (251-52). Cordelia, now the helpless, needy one, is most often the target for Elaine's verbal insults. Elaine, who sees that "energy has passed between us, and I am stronger" (250), wonders why she treats her best friend so malevolently. While Elaine effortlessly attracts boys, who feed on her indifference and cool detachment, Cordelia must rely on her friend to arrange for double dates. Finally Elaine becomes bored with Cordelia and begins to avoid her. Cordelia's grades fall and her parents move her to another school.

Even though they see each other three times after high school at Cordelia's behest, Elaine continues to snub her former friend even though "Things are bad for her, that much is clear" (275). Elaine knows she has nothing to offer her former friend in the way of solace because she herself is hard, cut off from all feeling and caring. She is not emotionally capable of handling the discomfort and embarrassment brought about by Cordelia's neediness; therefore, she hardens her heart and is dismayed at her own "cruelty and indifference", her "lack of kindness" (278). Her final meeting with Cordelia occurs when both women are grown, Elaine into a struggling artist and Cordelia into a suicidal misfit who has been institutionalized to prevent further attempts on her life. Elaine is

truly dismayed to see her former friend in such dire circumstances, drugged and despondent: "It's as if Cordelia has placed herself beyond me, out of my reach, where I can't get at her. She has let go of her idea of herself. She is lost" (379). Cordelia's pleas for help to escape fall on deaf ears, however, because Elaine is too engrossed in her own bad marriage to offer money or help. Instead she promises to visit, but never goes. She loses touch for the last time, gradually establishes her career, attempts suicide when her marriage threatens to drag her into another black period, then finds the strength once more to break out of a damaging relationship. As she had taken emotional flight from Cordelia and the other girls earlier, now she flees first emotionally with her suicide attempt, which parallels Cordelia's, and then physically leaves Toronto. Away from Toronto she establishes a satisfying relationship with Ben and develops a burgeoning career.

Because of Elaine's difficulty in establishing healthy female friendships early on, the isolation and insecurity of her childhood carry over into her adult life. However, even though she gives full accounts of her relationship with Josef Hrbik, her first lover, and Jon, her first husband, male relationships always seem to be "peripheral to the real issues of Elaine's life," says Stephen Ahern (12). Even of her current husband Ben, she finds, "I don't require him, he's no transfusion" (403). Compared to the inherent dangers of female liaisons, male relationships are more simple and uncomplicated. Elaine's knowledge of the male world had begun early when she and Stephen had spent their formative years playing together in relative isolation and peace. Since the men in her early life offered no antagonism toward her, she developed natural alliances with them. In grade school, she had to adjust to the segregated school system that kept her physically separated from the boys. Even though she knows "the unspoken rules of boys" (50), it is into the unknown world of girls that she is thrust. Even in high

school, while Cordelia is having trouble getting along with boys, Elaine's relationships with boys are "effortless" (254), which means she puts very little effort into them because she knows things about boys: "I know what goes on in their heads" (254).

Her early affinities with males come easy because, even though they provide an unknown element, they offer uncomplicated acceptance. Stephen and her father fall into a harmless category although her father is self-absorbed in his world of insects and exists only on the periphery of Elaine's life. Also, Mr. Banerji, the family friend from India, provides acceptance of Elaine during her difficult years with the girls. Even Mr. Smeath and Elaine share a quiet, conspiratorial relationship on the Sundays when Elaine attends church with the Smeaths: he winks at her and includes her in the conversation at lunch. He is her ally because even though he is "still a man," he "does not judge me" (133). Although fathers are "largely invisible" (102) during the day, they come out at night with their "enigmatic" and "unspeakable power" (176), wielding belts that leave marks and ruling the world with soft voices or iron fists according to their will. Even so, Elaine feels almost as much loyalty to Mr. Smeath as she does to her brother: "both are on the side of ox eyeballs, toe jam under the microscope, the outrageous, the subversive" (134). While the men serve as allies, friends, and "subversive" conspirators in Elaine's youth and adolescence, they nevertheless offer no protection from women and girls.

It is the world of women, whose daytime powers prove more damaging and real to Elaine than those of the men, that dominate Elaine's life. Women's power in the home is unavoidable and ubiquitous. Mrs. Smeath's sphere of authority, for instance, permeates every activity including the rationing of toilet paper to four squares at a time. Her uncharitable, judgmental ways are juxtaposed in Elaine's mind to her pious Christian demeanor. In one

of her paintings of Mrs. Smeath, she stares out from the flat surface of paint, "smiling her closed half-smile, smug and accusing" (358). Elaine's pictures of the iniquitous Mrs. Smeath multiply "like bacteria" (358) as Elaine attempts to purge her mind of distrust and loathing of the bourgeois matron. Considering Mrs. Smeath's knowing cruelty and Elaine's mother's indecisiveness and insensitivity, it is no wonder that Elaine has no adult female role models, except perhaps Mrs. Feinstein, the sympathetic and caring neighbor whom Elaine depicts as a magus in one of her paintings, but who nevertheless offers no help. With a dearth of female allies and few fond memories of female ties or friendship, the emotionally-battered artist claims, "Women know too much, they can neither be deceived nor trusted. I can understand why men are afraid of them" (401). These and similar comments draw attention to what Alice McDermott refers to as an "undercurrent of misogyny" (35) in the novel. Even though Elaine learns to resist being victimized in her female relationships, she nevertheless cannot establish trust with women because of the indelible psychological scarring left over from her childhood.

Elaine's antagonistic treatment of a young interviewer at Sub-Versions Gallery and her wariness of Charna, the organizer of the showing, emphasize her feeling that women "are a species of which I am not a member" (92). Reflecting the internalized legacy of Cordelia, she feels ill at ease with these women and imagines their unspoken condemnation: "*Your clothes are stupid. Your art is crap. Sit up straight and don't answer back*" (95). Finding sisterhood "a difficult concept. . . because I never had a sister" (365), she fails to form the kind of mutually beneficial alliances with women that provide support and comfort because she has never been able to trust women. In fact, she is surprised to learn that females "have more close women friends" (371) than she had imagined. Many of the people she comes in contact with are bold feminists who force

Elaine to confront her own failure with Jon and her feminist ideology; therefore, she avoids gatherings of these women for "fear of being sanctified, or else burned at the stake. . . . They make me more nervous than ever, because they have a certain way they want me to be, and I am not that way. They want to improve me. . . . I am not Woman" (401). However impossible it is for the alienated artist to find a comfortable place in the company of women, she nevertheless envies their conviction, their optimism, and their camaraderie.

Elaine's lifetime of defenses begins to crumble when she spends some time with her mother before her death and recovers her old cat's eye marble that she had considered a lucky charm as a child. When she and her mother find the marble in her old red purse in a trunk and gaze into it, she sees her entire life reflected in its alien eye. The memories unlocked by the cat's eye simmer in Elaine's thoughts, bringing with them the need and desire for reconciliation. As she walks through the familiar streets and paths of her childhood now, hoping to capture some glimpse of her old friend, she cries out in desperation, "Get me out of this, Cordelia. I'm locked in. I don't want to be nine years old forever" (422). She realizes for the first time that the threads of her life are irrevocably intertwined with those of Cordelia, but before she can put that period of her life to its final rest, she needs desperately to understand Cordelia's side of the story:

> 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. (434)

Judith McCombs believes this reflection Elaine wishes to give back to Cordelia intentionally echoes Virginia Woolf's remark in *A Room*

of One's Own about each gender's power to show the unseen spot at the back of the other's head. In *Cat's Eye,* however, Atwood re-conceives Woolf's argument, not between the genders, but among women only ("Contrary Rememberings" 15).

The many paintings at the gallery testify to the haunting influence of Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath during the early years of her life and the artist's malevolent quest for vengeance. Even though there are numerous pictures of Mrs. Smeath, Elaine has only one of Cordelia, entitled *Half a Face*, which shows Cordelia's entire face with a look of fear on it. Behind her is another face, covered with a white cloth, giving the theatrical look of a mask. The figure behind the mask (or flag of surrender?) is curious, for it could represent the theatrical part of Cordelia whose true identity and spirit are crushed out of her by her insensitive, conformist, social-climbing parents. Or perhaps the one behind the sheet is Elaine, the other half or alter ego of Cordelia, who projects her own unwanted qualities onto Elaine in order to hide them from herself. Either possibility complements the other because the two figures, one in plain view and one masked, represent the obverse of the other, reflecting Elaine's realization that "We are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key" (434).

The numerous pictures of Mrs. Smeath, who had known what the girls were doing to Elaine when she was nine and who had approved of their brutality, reveal to Elaine the savagery of her own contempt, scorn, and vengeance. One picture of Mrs. Smeath, *Leprosy*, shows her sitting in front of a mirror with half of her face peeling off, "like the villain in a horror comic" (372). In another, she is shown in her saggy-legged cotton underpants, her heart sectioned off and appearing like that of a dying turtle: "reptilian, dark-red, diseased" (372). Stenciled across the bottom of this one are the words, THE-KINGDOM-OF-GOD-IS-WITHIN-YOU. As Elaine stares at the pictures of Mrs. Smeath, curious about her blistering hatred of

the woman, she finds the answer in Mrs. Smeath's eyes:

> It's the eyes I look at now. 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. (427).

With this fresh insight into the pictures, Elaine finally sees herself as Mrs. Smeath must have seen her: "a frazzle-headed ragamuffin from heaven knows where, a gypsy practically, with a heathen father and a feckless mother. . . . how could she have known what germs of blasphemy and unfaith were breeding in me? And yet she took me in" (427). This realization of the contempt Mrs. Smeath must have experienced and attempted to conquer and Elaine's subsequent, relentless vengeance upon the woman in her art, leads her to the searing truth that "An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness" (427).

At the retrospective showing, Elaine peers over the room again and again in search of Cordelia. Finally, she must face the fact that her friend has vanished. At first she feels disappointment, then impatience, finally anxiety. Without Cordelia, she sees herself as "headed for a future in which I sprawl propped in a wheelchair, shedding hair and drooling, while some young stranger spoons mushed foot into my mouth and I stand and stand. While Cordelia vanishes and vanishes. . . .I've been prepared for almost anything; except absence, except silence" (435). She takes one last walk before leaving Toronto, hoping for a final opportunity to locate her friend and reconcile herself with her past. As she crosses over the bridge where Cordelia had once tossed her blue cap, she feels the presence of her old friend:

> I know she's looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a

> little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But they are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were. (443)

This final discovery and admission provides the missing piece of the puzzle and allows Elaine to weave together the truth of her painful childhood experience. As the mirroring, complementary halves merge, Elaine realizes that her pain was really Cordelia's pain, mirrored onto Elaine in a desperate attempt to escape her own self-aversion and sense of invisibility. Assimilating her memories, Elaine's quest ends with the acknowledgment of what she has accomplished on this trip: she has finally broken through the win-lose bondage she and Cordelia had forced on each other; she has removed the mote of vengeance from her own eye; and in forgiving both Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath, she has accepted the feminine code of mercy represented by Mary ("McCombs "Contrary Rememberings" 20).

Once the last of her memories has floated to the surface and performed its cathartic function, the frame image introduced in the first paragraph, that of time bending back upon itself and filling in the black hole of repressed memory and guilt, Elaine is ready to board the plane to Vancouver. However, a second and more telling frame technique follows the first, that of the young Elaine's vision of old age with a doting friend who shares her devil-may-care attitude. Appearing as Elaine's first flashback to her adolescence when she and Cordelia are riding the streetcar together, the scene represents what Elaine and Cordelia hope for themselves when they get old. On the bus, they watch the old ladies riding together, tottering toward senility and physical breakdown, but supported by one another's buoyancy and insouciance. Cordelia and Elaine envy in them "a certain gaiety. . . a power of invention" and the fact that

"they don't care what people think" (5). Laughing at their bizarre costumes and behavior, they see the women as having escaped, "though what it is they've escaped from isn't clear to us" (5). Decrepit, bizarre, and feeble as these old ladies are, their *joie de vivre* inspires in the two girls the hope that "when the time comes we also will be free to choose" (5).

In the last scene of the novel, once Elaine has left Toronto, she climbs aboard the plane exhausted and finds seated next to her two old ladies with knitted cardigans and mouths desiccated by bright red lipstick. Determined to have a good time, they play cards together and make bathroom jokes. Watching them, Elaine envies their carefree gaiety, despite their apparent disabilities. She connects these women to her earlier vision, deeply regretting that she and Cordelia will never share this future together, "Two old women giggling over their tea" (445).

Taken together, *The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Cat's Eye* show some striking similarities in structure and content. The novels all focus on female protagonists who are isolated and fragmented to some degree because they have been victimized by their lovers and friends, even by social conditioning, which Atwood describes as a machine that gradually assimilates and destroys the delicate psychological fabric of the individual. One of the things the protagonists do during their stories is to recognize the forces that have abused them, admit their own complicity in the act, and then renounce the destructive persons or things. But the process of renunciation involves some kind of flight, during which time the protagonists undergo a mythic descent into water, as does the surfacer in *Surfacing* and Elaine Risley in a symbolic immersion into the frozen ravine in *Cat's Eye.* Or an actual flight, as is the case twice with Marian McAlpin in *The Edible Woman*, may be the

catalyst that propels the character into motion and forces her to confront and renounce her individual demons. During this flight, which loosely follows the pattern of the questing hero described by Joseph Campbell, the women immerse themselves in healing waters or in underworld journeys from which they return with renewed strength and perception. The structural pattern that defines the quest for renunciation, integration, and healing is persistent in Atwood's early fiction:

Recognition => Flight => Renunciation

However, two of Atwood's later novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Robber Bride*, have veered toward resolutions that do not involve the mythic attention to flight or immersion. Instead of concentrating on women's solitary quest for integration and insight, they focus more on how women must stop their victimization by seeking solutions through creative interdependence on one another. Although men often function as villains and victimizers as well as occasional allies, they nevertheless remain peripheral to Atwood's central focus, which seems increasingly to be the necessity for women to learn to help, trust, nurture, and depend upon each other. Men have their place in women's lives, of course, but the daytime world that is dominated by women often overshadows the nighttime realm of men. Men come and go, Atwood's novels reveal, but female relationships, whether with daughters, mothers, sisters, friends, or enemies, contain their own weighty and inherent substance.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Robber Bride*, the mythic flight with its symbolic trip to the underworld is replaced by stories of women who learn to support, educate, and protect each other from harm. But the harm they must be protected from comes not just from men, but other women, who can at times be more perfidious than males. Both of these novels show the kinds of polarization, envy, and malice that divide women, as well as how mutual caring and interdependence lead to healthy attitudes and relationships. The

scene of the old women, sharing their last years of life together in *Cat's Eye*, illustrates Atwood's belief in the need to look after and nurture one another. In addition, both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Robber Bride* continue in the tradition of Atwood's earlier fiction by offering heroines who must learn to break out of their roles as victim.

This subject becomes the theme of *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which Atwood graphically describes one possible future when individuals fail to take responsibility for their own well being. It also deals in a very real way with women's survival in a hostile, male-dominated world. In this gripping novel, a weak and cowardly woman narrates her story about her bleak existence in her second floor room (or cell) where she serves as handmaid to a powerful and rich couple who hope to have her child.

How Offred becomes a victim of the protestant theocratic system slowly unfolds as she relives the horror of trying to escape the regime and recounts how she had been separated from her second husband and young daughter, about whose fate she has no knowledge, and she now serves as handmaid for the third period of her servitude. Handmaids like Offred who do not conceive in the prescribed time (three years) are passed along to another commander in hopes that a child will soon result, but they have only limited tenures as handmaids before they are demoted. Since all second marriages and nonmarital liaisons are considered adulterous by the new government, the women in such relationships are arrested and trained to become handmaids in re-education centers.

The new republic needs these breeders because the United States has botched the environment so badly that conception is a rarity. The abundance of birth control devices, for instance, has left many women sterile. Add to that new strains of syphilis and AIDS-infected pregnancies near the end of the twentieth-century, and what results are dangerous numbers of stillbirths, miscarriages, and

deformities. The nuclear-plant accidents during a string of earthquakes in California, acts of nuclear sabotage, and biological-warfare stockpiles have left a country that is leaking sickly toxic waste into its ground, water, and atmosphere. Also, a sterility-causing virus developed in pre-Gilead days that was banned because it had became too dangerous and uncontrollable, somehow has unleashed itself on the United States instead of Moscow. The once-abundant food supply is dwindling, and coastal areas are being "rested." In the wake of these disasters, a group of Islamic-like fanatics take over early in the twenty-first century, gunning down the president and Congress and suspending the constitution. They gradually seize control of the culture by banning newspapers, setting up roadblocks, and then instituting a new form of government, a nightmarish version of atavistic, Old Testament Puritanism . The repressive new republic, attempting to purge the country of its moral sickness, bans schools and universities, reading and writing for women ("Pen Is Envy" [241]), secular music, smoking, drinking, and sex for pleasure. Marriages are arranged and bearing children becomes the number one priority. This government, which is based on gender and class hierarchies, divides women into "Aunts," the ruthless indoctrinators at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center; "Marthas," the housekeepers who wear green; "Handmaids" or surrogate wombs, who wear red habits which cover their entire bodies and obscure their faces and whose names are stripped away in favor of a patronymic composed of a possessive preposition linked to their commanders' first names; "Econowives," the working-class women; "Unwomen," the sterile or undesirable (and therefore expendable) women who are sent to the colonies to clean up toxic waste sites; and so forth. The men are similarly divided, but retain certain patriarchal rights, such as owning property.

Each month Offred attends a ritual ceremony in which her commander reads a scripture, then performs the sex act on her as she lies motionless between his wife's legs, reflecting the Old Testament story in which Rachel tells Jacob, "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." If she becomes pregnant, she will receive certain privileges, one of which exempts her from ever being sent to the colonies, where the typical life span is four years. Her position exacts a great price from her emotionally and spiritually although she is physically privileged in terms of nutrition and freedom from manual labor because of her child-bearing status. Her prescribed routine involves countless hours of sitting alone in her small room with an occasional break to walk to the store for rations with another pre-selected handmaid, during which time conversation is prohibited except to express inane religious sentiment. The fact that government-planted spies are ubiquitous throughout the ranks insures that everyone distrusts the next person. Therefore, Offred and Ofglen, her walking companion, maintain the rigid protocol of the regime by suppressing any real communication. As a result, even though Offred longs for the human touch and comfort she once had, she is denied all pleasure and human intimacy. Passing the endless hours alone with no diversion, she rations her sanity as a starving person rations food. Clinging to the hope that she will some day get out of her present situation, she carefully controls her thoughts and feelings : "Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last" (10), she asserts to listeners of her tale.

Offred is an all-too-human protagonist, passive and submissive as the story opens, whose hope for rescue by her husband pervades her every thought as she dutifully carries out her function. In her life before the take-over, she had been neither heroic nor politically active, in contrast to her mother, who had been a feminist activist. Like the narrator in *Surfacing*, she detests her victimization, but as

she begins her story, she fails to admit her own responsibility for her fate. Her early refusal to safeguard her family and protect the environment and her democratic heritage is indicative of the society as a whole, which now suffers the loss of freedom as the price exacted for its failure to act when it could.

Even as she tells herself to have patience, that "sooner or later he will get me out. . . . I must endure, keep myself safe for later" (135), she fails to act in any meaningful way that might help others or help her to establish a sense of personal worth. Only vaguely aware of the underground system yet fervently believing in the resistance (how else will she escape?), she is too fearful to become an agent of change herself. In fact, her only link to subversive activity is her friend from before, Moira, a renegade who refuses to give up her name or live by the totalitarian dictates. Even though Moira represents "gallantry" and "swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat" (324) to Offred, the fearful handmaid values her own physical safety above sisterhood.

During the course of the novel, Offred wrestles with her own sense of cowardice, and role models like Moira and Ofglen help her to see herself as a part of a larger system that is straining to crack under the pressure of human misery. When her gynecologist offers his own service to help her get pregnant during her monthly check up, she will not consider it because that involves taking a risk; however, gradually she begins to take actions that involve an element of risk when she realizes her position is already precarious. For instance, she begins seeing her commander on the sly in his study where to her surprise, he wants to play scrabble. Once there, she bargains with him for things she wants, such as hand lotion and the privilege of reading when she is in his library. The commander even sneaks her to an illicit night club where alcohol and prostitutes in enticing clothing are available. "'Nature demands variety, for

men'" (308), the commander explains to Offred in an attempt to justify the adulterous double standard and to explain men's lagging sexual desire in the new republic. To her surprise, even Serena Joy, the commander's wife who had been a sort of Phyllis Schafly before the take-over (Rigney *Margaret Atwood* 116), engages in an occasional subversion herself. She obtains cigarettes from the black market, but even more startling, she sets up a sexual liaison between Offred and Nick, the family chauffeur, in hopes that he will succeed in impregnating Offred since her husband has failed thus far.

Ofglen finally reveals herself to Offred as a member of the Mayday underground, and the two begin a dangerous and illicit exchange of secrets. Still fearful, Offred trusts what little information she has to her fellow handmaid because the risk now outweighs her previous feeling of hopelessness. However, once she and Nick begin a torrid love affair, one more frequent and clandestine than Serena Joy had planned, Offred becomes so emotionally dependent on him that she resists further involvement in underground activity. Admitting to Ofglen that she is pregnant, she even resists the offer of an escape: "The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him" (348). Willing to settle for the temporary comfort of Nick and reluctant to escape her victimization, she and Ofglen all but terminate their intimate connection on their walks, during which time Offred feels no regret, only relief.

However, the subsequent sacrifice of Ofglen's life for Offred makes the handmaid see that apathy, noninterference, and fear prevent one from taking responsibility for the preservation of society. The conflation of events that brings about Ofglen's suicidal hanging begins at a Particicution, in which a man, a scapegoat accused of rape, is ritually torn apart by the handmaids, who must all participate in his execution while the other ranks of women look

on. At one of these events, Ofglen fights her way to the front of the group, promptly knocking the man unconscious in order to ease his suffering and informing Offred that the man is no rapist, but a member of the underground. When the notorious black van later pulls up to arrest Ofglen, she hangs herself quickly to prevent revealing her underground secrets under torture and to prevent implicating Offred, who as her walking partner, would automatically become suspect. Offred learns of this sacrifice through the new Ofglen who is not, as Offred now says, "one of us" (364). Without being aware of it herself, Offred has emotionally joined the ranks of the subversive Mayday system. Wrestling with the greatness of Ofglen's sacrifice and fearing for her own safety, Offred vacillates in emotion: "I don't want pain. . . . I want to keep on living in any form. I resign my body freely to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject" (368). In utter dejection, she even considers suicide because "I'm tired of keeping silent. . . . I want it finished" (375). In her misery, she discovers that her silent complicity in this society, even with the interspersed moments of fulfillment with Nick, is actually worse than death, for it is a living death that has no end.

Offred's fate beyond this moment is unclear because her story ends just as the black van pulls up to arrest her for violation of state secrets. Declaring himself a member of Mayday and asking her to trust him, Nick shoves Offred into the van and toward her destiny. The remainder of her story is pieced together in a Historical Note at the end of the novel dated June 25, 2195, in which a Professor Pieixoto discusses the tapes and other historical details related to her case at a symposium on Gileadean Studies. Although no one is certain, it is believed that Offred escaped into Canada and from there, most likely to England. It is doubtful she would have identified herself after her escape, the professor claims, because of fear of retaliation against her former husband and daughter, who

remained in the Republic. Gilead is not only a defunct society by this time, but is considered as an interesting yet trivial aberration in cultural history.

Despite its enormous popularity and critical acclaim, the novel is curious to many critics, who at first hailed it as "an admirable banner of liberal feminist insurgency," says Sandra Tomc in a re-assessment of the novel. She cites critics who began to question the paradigm of female romance inherent in the novel, in which the self-protective and passive heroine refuses "a politics of emancipation" (73) for the love of a man. What many critics finally charged was that the novel advocates traditional femininity rather than insurgent feminism, to which Tomc replies that the romance conventions are presented in the tale as the "*instruments* of escape" (79), to signify "the potential of resistance and hope" (82). This element of "the persistence of love even in a loveless world," says Rigney, is what makes Atwood's novels and poems so powerful (119-20). Perhaps Offred does not break the bonds of her victimization alone, but the fact that she learns to trust Nick and to depend on him and Ofglen and Moira for encouragement and support only points more clearly to Atwood's shifting paradigm toward mutual interdependence as the means of refusing victimhood and of saving each other. Even though she is rescued at the end by Nick, she has reached a state of mind in which the few people she cares about, women and men, have given her the courage to act for a common good in spite of her fears. What she does after her rescue testifies to that new sense of moral courage.

Uncourageous as Offred may seem at the end, it is at that moment that she breaks through her pattern of emotional escape and flight to make a series of thirty cassette tapes telling her story at great personal danger, something she would never have risked earlier in the novel. Perhaps as Rigney points out, Offred surfaces from her experience with a recognition that "political confrontation is not

merely a choice but a human responsibility" (120). Her job is to report what has happened to her, to warn others of what happens when people become too indifferent or lazy to protect themselves and preserve their environment. Like the diver in *Surfacing*, Offred perceives the necessity of communication:

> But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it. . . . By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you . . . . Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (344)

Ultimately, says Rigney, the act of writing [or telling] is for Atwood and her heroines, "the final and irrevocable commitment to one's society and to one's own humanity" (121). Therefore, it is safe to say that Offred not only breaks away from her victimizers with the help of friends, but she offers her knowledge and a warning to future generations through her spoken legacy. In doing so, she purges herself of the moral cowardice that has plagued her and affirms through language a renewed hope for the world.

One of the characters in Atwood's latest novel, *The Robber Bride*, a historian and war strategist muses that "War is what happens when language fails" (39), reiterating Atwood's point about the necessity of words if people are going to learn how to get along together. All of Atwood's fiction brings up the issue of how a failure to communicate results in victimization, misunderstanding, and destruction. The young and intelligent protagonist in *The Edible Woman*, for instance, finds herself being consumed by a society that seeks to mold her into the socially-prescribed ideal, one into which she cannot fit despite years of conditioning and her own attempts to fulfill the role to its perfection. One of the reasons Marian and Peter fail in their relationship is that she never discusses her fears

about marriage with him, but reacts to them instead through flight or starvation. And when Peter is confronted with the edible woman cake and an opportunity to discuss their problems, he flees, choosing flight rather than honest, open communication. Similarly, the diver in *Surfacing* suffers from a breakdown of language between herself and her parents, her former lover, and her current lover. Not telling her parents about her painful relationship with her art teacher and not letting Joe into her life on an open and intimate level has kept her in a state of emotional alienation. One of her first admissions after she emerges from her quest for identity is that the intercession of words is fundamental to life.

Had Elaine Risley been able to talk with her mother about the victimization she was suffering from Cordelia in *Cat's Eye*, or had she been able to talk to Cordelia after high school when her friend desperately needed help, perhaps she would not be the lonely, isolated, and fragmented woman in her fifties who now grieves for the friend she let go, a companion with whom she had hoped to share her old age. Seeking reconciliation with her former nemesis after the passage of many years, Elaine discovers she is too late and that her friend has vanished. At some point in Atwood's fiction, the protagonists finally realize the absolute necessity of language--to exchange information, ideas, and feelings-- as the wellspring of human progress and endeavor. This is what Offred discovers just as she reaches the point of deepest despair, and for her this knowledge is saving grace--she must tell her story, warn others, help to save the planet from further harm, from future wars.

There are different kinds of war, however, as Tony discovers in *The Robber Bride*, other than those fought over for greed or avarice or domination. The battle sometimes occurs on one's own homefront, and the enemy is one's friend and confidant. In this most recent novel, three adult women who had been loosely connected in college are now bound together by the harrowing victimization they suffered

at the hands of Zenia, another college buddy who had insidiously ingratiated herself into their lives, used and mistreated them, then betrayed and threatened to destroy all three. Blackmail, theft of men and money, and emotional terrorism are among the many tricks in her pandora's box. The three women barely escape their ordeals with their arch-nemesis, but get through the subsequent shell shock by sharing their experiences as soldiers do who have lived through battle together. Even though they believe Zenia is dead--all three attended her funeral--they get together for lunches to relive the trauma and to fortify themselves against further suffering. Different as they all are, one a war strategist, one a New Age fanatic, and one the editor of a successful women's magazine, their common bond reinforces their ties and commitment to each other.

As with other Atwood fiction, *The Robber Bride* explores the subject of communication and mutual interdependence as a means of resisting victimization, for it is only the close ties and mutual concern of Tony, Charis, and Roz that allow the three middle-aged women to build a fortress of common strength that ultimately withstands the enemy. However, communicating with the enemy does not seem possible with Zenia, who takes advantage of what information she gets and then uses it to manipulate and exploit her victims; therefore, the three women combine their emotional and mental resources to turn them on Zenia when she appears three years after her supposed death in a Toronto restaurant where the women are having lunch together.

The sight of Zenia shocks the three friends and brings back a flurry of bitter memory and recrimination. They compare her various fictitious pasts as the orphaned daughter of White Russians, Romanian Gypsies, or Berlin Jews, and her many guises as cancer victim, journalist doing research, and freelance spy. Tony, Roz, and Charis are never able to come to an understanding of Zenia or to

discover why she had so callously victimized them once and then returned to attempt it again. After their second close call with the female predator, whom one critic calls "Richard III with breast implants . . . . Iago in a miniskirt. . . . viral, self-mutating, [and] opportunistic" (Moore 22), the women simply accept her carnivorous pathology as part of the mystery of being. Zenia's motivation remains unsolved and her real self unknown in the end for those in the narrative as well as for readers of it.

But if there is one thing that these and other heroines have learned throughout the evolution of Atwood fiction, it is that whether the cause of victimization is tangible or not, they must refuse the role and give up their complicity in the matter. They learn, as does Offred at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, that they have a moral responsibility to resist their abusers and to warn, educate, or support others that may threaten to fall into the same traps. Upon seeing their old nemesis in Toronto, the three protagonists in *The Robber Bride* marshal their forces by increasing communication and hiring a private detective. When one woman's strength begins to waver, the others move in with encouragement and assistance. As Zenia attempts to play the same tricks that she had during college, to suck her former victims into an even more threatening vortex of deceit and manipulation, together they manage to resist one last time the strange, evil hold she has on the women's collective and individual psyches. The three women finally observe Zenia's actual spectacular death, possibly by suicide, and close the book on her for the last time, aware that their vigilance has seen them safely through this final confrontation. They emerge from the experience safe, but weary as soldiers, much more aware of human vanity, of the transitory nature of sexual relationships, and the incomprehensibility of evil.

The Robber Bride is the only Atwood novel in this study that does not involve a flight, whether it be literal (*The Edible Woman*

and *Surfacing*), mythical (*Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye*), or emotional (*Cat's Eye* and *The Handmaid's Tale*). As Atwood's fiction has evolved and matured, so have her heroines, who no longer feel the need to flee, but instead find the resources to confront their foes straight on and to put an end to their victimization to the degree that it is possible. Whereas the stories of earlier protagonists end with renunciation of victimization, the later heroines go beyond renunciation toward creative solutions. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance Offred, who is denied paper and pen, manages to convey her message to others on old Elvis Presley, Boy George, and Twisted Sister cassette tapes, cleverly superimposing her story on top of the original songs. A creative solution for the protagonists of *The Robber Bride* is as simple as three women banding together for a common purpose, women who are not very strong or aggressive individually, but whose collective strength leads to the defeat of the enemy. Therefore, if Atwood's fiction continues in its current mode, readers may see more of the new paradigm in future novels:

recognition => action => resolution

This direction is a positive one because it renders solutions for victims seeking fresh ways of understanding and ending oppression. Obviously, problems in relationships with men or antagonistic women will not simply evaporate once a woman has identified and renounced her victimization, because human relations are never easy and negative cultural attitudes take centuries to overcome. But each woman develops strategies and tools for taking control of her life to a much greater degree than she had before and in doing so creates the opportunity for increasing her sense of self worth and passing her hard-won knowledge on to others in the form of a legacy.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

When one considers the work of Pym, Weldon, and Atwood, the first thing that comes to mind is the separate, cumulative effect these writers evoke in the reader. That is, each author has her own style, type of character, setting, subject matter, and tone so that her special province as a writer is distinguishable from that of the other two. If one were asked to make a quick summary of a Barbara Pym novel, for instance, one would most likely describe the post-war London scene and a particular kind of heroine, probably a spinster, a woman who is intelligent and self-effacing, one who is a quiet and ironic observer of life. Asked to do the same with Fay Weldon, one conjures up an entirely different picture: domestic chaos and harried housewives with broods of daughters, mothers, and friends, many on the brink of personal anarchy. For Margaret Atwood, the perspective shifts again, this time to North America and a strong, introspective type of protagonist who is wrestling with her past as she searches for the best way to face the future. Interesting and varied as these perspectives are, they fail to convey the singular interest of Pym, Weldon, and Atwood: the problems of recognizing and breaking out of female victimization in the last half of the twentieth century.

Whether the tone is gentle, probing, insistent, or shrill, each writer dramatizes the victimization of her female characters at home, in relationships, and in the social realm. More importantly, all three authors offer valid methods for their protagonists to break out of their victimization to a degree that is possible and in keeping

with each heroine's personality and strengths. Furthermore, Pym, Weldon, and Atwood exhibit underlying structures in their narratives that drive their characters through their reactions against their victimization to their ultimate conclusions. Each author's work fits into a basic pattern, I have argued:

Pym:	Recognition	=>	Adjustment	=>	Acceptance
Weldon:	Recognition	=>	Rebellion	=>	Victory
Atwood:	Recognition	=>	Flight	=>	Renunciation

While these patterns display significant differences, they have in common the protagonists' recognition of her victimization, her reaction to it, and her final resolution. Whether they end with acceptance, victory, or renunciation, the novels in this study conclude with a positive action or attitude, so that taken together they offer readers a variety of thoughtful approaches to handling victimization as well as illuminate the inherent limits of breaking out of oppression or abuse.

In her novels, Barbara Pym described the conditions of women living in London immediately after World War II, chronicling the narrow sphere of their lives and the problems they faced in securing marriage during a period when women outnumbered men. Because so many of these spinsters existed, they were forced into a position of subjugation and servitude, yet society ignored the sense of sadness and yearning of these women. Pym illuminated their worries about money, about a secure living arrangement, or about growing old alone. Even married protagonists in Pym's novels find themselves unhappy, whether or not their husbands are financially secure. They find that marriage has not provided the kind of fulfillment they had been conditioned to expect since childhood. They do not feel valued at home, nor do they have satisfying careers (except for Catherine in *Less Than Angels*) or many outlets for self-expression or action.

Having been trained to see man and his work as more significant than woman or her needs, they sublimate their own desires and search for alternate paths of fulfillment. Whether married or single, however, Pym's women crave love, respect, and happiness as a natural function of being a woman. Yet everywhere they turn, they see the problems with love and marriage; the preference of men for pretty women over more suitable, but less attractive, women; the difficulty of achieving a sense of importance and respect in a patriarchal society; and the vast difference in what women expect from life and what they actually get.

As Pym's quintessential spinster, Mildred projects all the worries and problems a single woman faced during the austere period after the war. Like other women, she craves the attention and flattery of men, but finds herself without prospects because she is dowdy and virtuous. By the novel's end, however, even though she has earned the favor of Everard Bone and should consider herself lucky by society's standards, Mildred has real reservations about the marriage. She decides to accept Everard, not because of his good looks or the security he offers, but because she craves the status of being married and of having someone to care for. She realizes she will be trading her typing, indexing, and domestic skills for his fidelity and companionship as she grows old. Like many other Pym characters, she adjusts to the fact that he will never offer her the adoration, passion, or charm she would prefer, but decides his approbation and respect are enough for her to be contented, if not ecstatically happy.

Similarly, *Some Tame Gazelle* and *Less Than Angels* explore the problems of women who remain single. Belinda Bede, in love with the Archdeacon Hoccleve for thirty years knows any opportunity for a happy marriage is long past. She worries instead how she will live if her sister marries. Having been brought up

traditionally in a small British village and, having no formal career, she underscores what it feels like to be a marginal member of society. Through the process of recognition and adjustment to her status as a spinster, she learns to accept the small pleasures in life rather than to anticipate larger ones, such as marriage or the birth of children. She finally finds satisfaction in small compliments paid to her by friends, in her close relationship with her sister, and in her perceptive conclusion that marriage to the archdeacon would have produced only boredom and disappointment. Loving him from a distance, she has been able to idealize him without having to face his unappealing qualities. Even though she still worries about her living arrangement, she reaches a mature acceptance of her situation and the realities of life and is content.

In *Less Than Angels*, Pym explored the changing sexual roles in society and women's need for autonomy and a feeling of self-worth while still craving to be loved. Except for Prudence Bates, Catherine Oliphant is Pym's only career woman in her canon who has been raised to look for a strong man and wage earner, a dominant type who would rule the house, while Tom has been conditioned to look for a passive woman who reveres him and places his needs above her own. Their relationship dissolves because she is too strong for him and brings out feelings of resentment in him. In this novel, Pym shows how most people are victimized by the perpetuation of false sexual stereotypes that contrast with their own feelings and experience. Pym's general tendency in this and other novels is to illustrate how all her women desire love and attention, but how, given their limitations and the dearth of desirable men, they make the best choice possible, some choosing marriage, some preferring to remain single. In Catherine's case, her personal sense of self-worth prevents her from subordinating herself to Tom; therefore, she remains true to her deeper need for self-approval even though it costs her the relationship. In spite of the disappointment, she

moves on and eventually meets another man who is less rigid about sexual roles.

Pym's gentle social protest continued in her novels that explored the feelings and plights of married women. Even though they obtain the status and security denied single women, they nevertheless find themselves unhappy, unappreciated, or undervalued both at home and in society. In *Jane and Prudence*, Jane Cleveland represents what Pym saw as a typically-married woman. She had been well educated, then married to a rather monotonous and unworldly vicar. She finds herself unskilled at being the sort of clergyman's wife found in her beloved Victorian novels, indifferent to domestic tasks, and disappointed in her romantic relationship with her husband. She finally is able to accept that one's earlier expectations and romantic illusions must give way to a realistic view of life. Jane learns by observing Prudence, her friend and former student who goes from one unsuccessful affair to another, that even youth, beauty, a career, and the single status do not guarantee one happiness. Jane's character emphasizes Pym's belief that detachment and compassion enable one to accept human limitations and shortcomings in life and yet to find satisfaction in what remains.

This same lesson is one that Wilmet discovers, the attractive, but rather self-absorbed protagonist in *A Glass of Blessings*, whose desire for romance and appreciation threatens her marriage. Unlike Jane Cleveland, who has a marvelous education and derives great pleasure from it, Wilmet has no great education to sustain her nor a career. But while Jane is bored with the simple, rural life, Wilmet shops, dines and lives, in everyone's estimation, a charmed life. However, fading romance and lack of attention from her husband elicits in Wilmet, as in other married Pymian characters, the desire for excitement and fulfillment. More than any other Pymian character, she has been clinging to false assumptions about love and

marriage as idealized in literature and in the popular imagination and wishes for a kind of unrealistic romance that Rodney and other Pym males are incapable of giving. When she discovers Piers does not desire her, she reaches the painful recognition phase of her experience and learns to look for happiness in other realms of her life: by becoming more involved in church, by befriending more women, by using her decorating talents at church and at home, and by learning to develop new attitudes more appropriate to this stage of her life and marriage. Life is not made up of the romantic dalliances found in novels, Pym emphasizes through Wilmet, but in the pleasures of living comfortably and realistically with a loved one and in finding one's niche outside the romantic sphere of life.

Fay Weldon's protagonists, by contrast, live far different lives from Pym's. While Pym's fiction chronicles the narrow sphere of women's life and their calm acquiescence to reality, Weldon's novels capture the chaotic life at home among overburdened women, their abusive husbands, and troublesome friends. Dealing with the subjects of sexual abuse, marriage, infidelity, divorce, abortion, domestic drudgery, motherhood, and thwarted careers, Weldon takes her unhappy women through recognition of their situations to rebellion and finally to victory over their detractors. Before these women find solutions to their problems, they must confront the unsympathetic men who flaunt their power in games of sexual prowess, domination, or oppression. Furthermore, these women often fail to turn to other women for help because of their habit of seeing other women as threats and because of their ingrained loyalties to men. Weldon's females learn how to break out of their victimization by confronting their abusive or thoughtless men when necessary; in addition, they learn to seek solidarity and good faith among other women.

One of Weldon's favorite techniques has been to introduce multiple characters who learn from each other. In *Female Friends*,

Chloe must learn to rely on her friends at the end of the novel because she is finally ready to get out of her destructive and humiliating marriage to Oliver. However, since she has no education and few prospect for a career, she learns to accept the assistance of Marjorie and Grace. The women realize they must help each other more often and not just "pick up pieces" (20) after a disaster. When Helen dies, leaving her daughter the large house, Marjorie offers it to her old friend so that Chloe can leave Oliver and raise her children in peace. Chloe learns that following her mother's precept to "understand and forgive" will only leave her exhausted and used up. The other two characters in the novel have also been victimized at various points in their lives, and through them Weldon emphasizes that women must try to find healthy ways of coping or at least ways of mitigating the pain through activities like returning to school, taking another job, throwing out an offending lover, or getting a manicure. Repressing hurt and submerging anger in housework produce only illness, Weldon's protagonists learn, as they watch their mothers die miserable, premature deaths.

In *Remember Me*, Weldon adds a supernatural motif as she explores the way in which another housewife learns self-assertion. Using multiple female characters again, whose lives are intertwined through adultery and bastard children, Weldon takes her characters through their anger and to forgiveness and acceptance of each other. Margot, the unappreciated wife of Philip, learns to break out of her exploitation at home with the supernatural help of the dead woman. As a medium, Madeleine spurs the overly submissive Margot to demand respect from her family and brings havoc into her life until the harried wife finally gets the esteem she deserves. Also, Lily, the acquisitive wife of Jarvis, learns to appreciate the fragility of life and love. After exacting an apology from Jarvis and Lily and settling her daughter in with Philip and Margot, Madeleine finally

lets go of her need for revenge and gives up her haunting earthly visitations. By the end of the story, because the characters have absorbed the lessons of forgiveness and tolerance, equilibrium is restored and everyone has gained insight from the experience.

Another topic Weldon explores is the misery of being unattractive in a world that values physical beauty far too much. Like *Remember Me, The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* is another story of a scorned and betrayed wife and her revenge on her husband. Dramatizing the misery of an ugly woman (Ruth) who has suffered humiliation her entire life because of her size and physical demeanor, Weldon adds a new victim to her list of the downtrodden--the unfortunate woman who desires love and attention but is denied it because of her looks. Weldon also shows how the desire for revenge can ruin a woman who loses all sight of proportion and rationality as she attempts to destroy those who have hurt her. Ruth's rebellion lasts for years and exacts great physical sacrifice, and while she succeeds in destroying Mary and Bobbo, she fails to acknowledge her more important accomplishments along the way: establishing and running a successful business and improving the lives of those she had touched. Her victory is complete at the end of the novel, but it leaves her empty because it fails to satisfy her deeper need for love and approbation. Rebellion and revenge have their place in human affairs, says Weldon through Ruth's experience, but against the greater need for love and appreciation, a woman stands to lose too much. Diabolic excess only serves to enslave her and makes her victory meaningless.

If Mildred is Pym's quintessential spinster, then Praxis is Weldon's quintessential victim. In *Praxis,* Weldon's most serious novel in this study, Weldon explores the ways in which many women are complicit in their abusive treatment, never complaining or asserting themselves because of years of indoctrination about the supposed subservient nature of women and because of their deep

sense of inferiority. Praxis's miserable childhood leaves her without the tools for handling her relationships or for learning how to commit to others. When she is abandoned in her third relationship, she finally begins to take the women's movement seriously, becoming its persuasive spokesperson and advocate. She decides to live by her own standards rather than those set by society, and even goes to prison for remaining true to her new set of principles. As a result of her experience and newly-developed philosophy, she exhorts women to "fight nature tooth and claw" (133) because once women expend their procreative energies, nature abandons them. In the process of her rebellion, Praxis learns the meaning--and cost--of commitment.

Margaret Atwood's novels also deal with the cost of women's commitment to themselves or to a cause and stress the moral imperative for women to speak up against abuse or violence against any victim--human, animal, or environmental. Her protagonists often begin their narratives as victims who have absolved themselves from responsibility in their own situations, finding it easier to decry their abuse while refusing to take moral or ethical action to alleviate the problem. Atwood takes them through experiences that help them see how they must refuse the role of victim in order to live healthy, productive lives. Usually, the protagonist is a woman like the diver in *Surfacing* who suffers a split in her body and spirit, and she must go back to an earlier period in her life to find the healing she needs. Often this experience involves a flight, whether emotional or mythic, into a physical and/or psychological realm where she temporarily leaves the sane world and later returns to it healed, renewed, and insightful.

This underworld journey that loosely follows Joseph Campbell's monomyth becomes the predominant means for the protagonists of *Surfacing* and *Cat's Eye* to learn healthier, more life-affirming

ways of being. Both the surfacer and Elaine make a mythic submergence in healing waters to comprehend and end their victimization. In the case of the surfacer, facing her own lies about an abortion she had helps her to start the healing process, but only after transmogrifying herself into nature does she find her personal gods and learn to accept the death of her parents. She returns to the world determined "to refuse to be a victim" (233), as she sets about healing her estrangement from her boyfriend, abandoning her job, and conceiving of ways to stop the Americans from further harming the delicate primitive wilderness.

Much like the surfacer, Elaine in *Cat's Eye*, is crippled by events in her childhood which continue to haunt her. Until she comes to an understanding of her cruel victimization by her three school chums and her own part in it, she is a fragmented, alienated woman who cannot accept her own success as an artist or woman. As a child, Elaine had finally broken out of the destructive hold of the girls when she plunged into the icy ravine waters and prayed to the Virgin Mary to save her. Following this mythic submergence and visitation by her savior, Elaine had gained the strength to simply walk away from her friends, breaking their influence over her. Yet as she rises into popularity and power over her former abusers, she becomes hardened and as cruel as they had been earlier. Confronting these ghosts at her retrospective showing, she finally learns to forgive Cordelia and to accept her own dark guilt in the experience.

Even though the flights of the surfacer and Elaine have a mythic dimension to them, Atwood used the flight motif in both literal and emotional ways as well. For instance, in *The Edible Woman*, Marian McAlpin, who is engaged to Peter and suddenly finds herself unable to eat, inexplicably takes flight from her fiance several times because she has not yet assimilated the cause of her discomfort: a subconscious rebellion against the oppressive roles demanded of her at work, in society, and in her relationship with Peter. She finally

puts together the disparate promptings from her psyche about the roles being forced on her and realizes she cannot conform to the values demanded of her. Her eating of the cake and metaphorically consuming herself (the tempting morsel portion of herself that invites consumption and victimization), signals the end of her stalemate and confusion. She is free to begin learning what will make her happy without having to resort to further flight and starvation. She learns, as must all Atwood protagonists, to listen to her innermost promptings and to take responsibility for her well-being.

The Handmaid's Tale is another novel in which Atwood uses an emotional flight as a means for her protagonist to contemplate her victimization, then take action to protect herself and others from further violence. Through Offred, Atwood explores how weakness, laziness, apathy, and fear of retribution can prevent people from protecting themselves and from fighting for what they believe is right. The novels illustrates the horrors of what can happen when people give up individual responsibility for maintaining peace and freedom. Offred's possible pregnancy and the love of Nick, along with the good example of Moira and Ofglen, finally help her to see the necessity of positive moral action, even if it involves risk to herself. Therefore, her secretly recorded cassette tapes revealing the terrors of Gileadean oppression provide a warning to future generations and emphasize Offred's hope that the Gileadean atrocities will not be repeated.

Atwood's latest fiction, *The Robber Bride*, invites speculation about a new paradigm for the novelist, for this one contains no flight (except that by Zenia, the arch enemy of Tony, Roz and Charis) and shifts away from ending with a renunciation scene of a single protagonist like those in *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and *Cat's Eye*. Later Atwood fiction moves more positively toward action and resolution through the interdependence of several characters. In

The Robber Bride, Tony, Roz, and Charis, face one last confrontation with their former nemesis by summoning up their collective energy and strengths. They learn from painful past experience that the only way to defeat their former friend is through female solidarity. Rather than simply renounce their foe, then hope for the best, these protagonists join together in mutual determination and support of one another: they follow the woman, set detectives on her, and keep close watch on one another. As a result of their combined caution and action, the situation has a final resolution. The new paradigm goes past renunciation to action to resolution.

These summaries illustrate that each author propels her protagonists through a loose pattern that takes them to some kind of resolution of their victimization. But just how complete, how propitious, how valid is the paradigm as a structure that propels a woman through victimization to a point of positive action or attitude? To what degree does each heroine actually achieve success given the fact that changes in patriarchal thinking are achieved only with great amounts of time and at great personal costs? And finally, does one author show more insight in accomplishing her purposes?

A cursory glance at Pym's paradigm (recognition => adjustment => acceptance) may give the impression that her heroines simply accept their sad lot in life. These novels do end with a strong sense of acceptance of the world as it is and an insight into the fact that little can be done to change the unequal distribution of the sexes in post war period or indeed to change the social milieu that privileges men over women, leaving women feeling unimportant and unappreciated. Therefore, someone like Mildred, who desires the status of marriage and the company of a man, really has little

choice. She can spend her life fighting the system, but the things she is up against take generations, perhaps centuries, to change. Even if she were to admit her victimization and decide to fight it, she has no tangible tool with which to change men or to repair her social environment. Given the facts at hand, she makes the best choice possible in deciding to marry Everard. While it is true she would have preferred a romantic and charming man like Rocky, she instinctively understands that men like him offer nothing in the way of long-term happiness. Even though one may argue that Mildred is simply trading one form of victimization for another in agreeing to become Everard's typist and cook, at least she chooses the option that most pleases her. In the world as Pym sees it, women have few choices and must make the one that will provide the protagonist with the greatest sense of dignity and contentment.

The same applies to other Pymian heroines, who make the best choice of what is available to them. They are not cowards who meekly accept what life dishes out to them. Belinda Bede, Jane Cleveland, and Wilmet Forsyth all face disappointments in their romantic relationships, but deciding that their beloveds cannot live up to the expectations they had held, these women look for alternate activities that provide satisfaction. They develop self-knowledge and a sense of detachment that allows them to appreciate the blessings in their lives. Nor will Pymian women degrade themselves simply to have a man. Catherine Oliphant, for instance, in *Less Than Angels*, refuses to idolize and fuss over Tom just because he is a man. She loses him rather than debase herself in an unequal relationship. In contrast, Allegra Gray in *Excellent Women* is the sort who will manipulate to capture a man at any costs, but she is portrayed with such disapproval that her example is clear to readers: women have moral responsibilities to themselves and to others as they make these decisions. Maliciously tricking a man into marriage when a woman has no feelings for him is morally wrong, as

attested to in Pym's novels that portray cloying, manipulative women. With few exceptions, Pymian women are strong individuals who see their plight clearly but, believing little can be done about it, bravely accept the disappointments and then look forward with a sense of irony and comedy to those pleasures that remain.

Although Pym's canon carries a message of gentle social protest, Weldon's seems insistent and biting, by contrast. Her paradigm (recognition => rebellion => victory), appears more appealing on the surface because each novel ends with victory. However, when one examines the difficulties her characters go through to achieve that victory, one realizes the high cost of rebellion and change. Because Weldon protagonists are too miserable in their situations to learn to appreciate their blessings in life (in fact, they have few, if any, blessings), often they must rebel in order to improve or change their environments. Whereas a Pymian woman may have to worry about finding a decent man, the Weldon woman almost always has an abusive man. Also although Pymian women usually have no children and no husbands, Weldon protagonists have husbands, lovers, children, and friends, all of whom make great demands on their time and energy. Therefore, given their humiliating, subordinate, and dependent positions at home, Weldon's characters find that rebellion is their only route to freedom or change (unlike Pym's who find no solution other than cheerful acceptance). Chloe in *Female Friends*, for instance, has put up with Oliver for years because she has no career and five children to raise. However, as soon as she gets the offer of Marjorie's house, "She is her own woman again" (200) and leaves. The acceptance that Pymian women achieve is not possible of Weldon women because Weldon casts men in more abusive behavior than does Pym. Pym's men may have a blown-up sense of their own importance and may slight, neglect, or undervalue women, but they never intentionally abuse them in the way Oliver, Willie,

and Phillip do in *Female Friends* and *Praxis.*

Furthermore, Madeleine's supernatural insistence on revenge and victory after her death threaten to irrevocably upset the lives of Margot and Lily and their families, pointing out Weldon's concern about the limits to which women should go to achieve victory over the man in a disintegrating relationship. Madeleine finally mitigates her fury with the realization that she is only one of millions of abandoned wives and that Lily deserves forgiveness. While Ruth takes her revenge and rebellion to monstrous excess, Madeleine withdraws, leaving just a touch of her feistiness in Margot, the abused housewife, whose rebellion brings about the attention and sense of victory she deserves.

In the cases of Chloe, Margot, and Praxis, their rebellions and victories are healthy and appropriate, if overdue, although in Ruth's case her vengeance is too damaging to be beneficial. A little healthy rebellion, Weldon would admit, is normal and propels a woman into action, but too much may rob her of a sense of proportion and rationality. At some point, a woman must move on, and this Ruth refuses to do. She exacts her revenge on Bobbo and Mary until the ending scene echoes that of a Greek tragedy: everyone is dead or destroyed, even Ruth, the victor. Even though Ruth accomplishes everything she set out to do and considers herself the winner, making even nature bow to her command, her victory is qualified at best, hollow at worst. In physically mutilating herself, she has transformed herself into the object of her own hatred. Her admission that "In the end, [Mary Fisher] wins" (266) emphasizes Weldon's premise that at some point, women must forgive, give up their rage, and move to more productive stages of their lives.

In her novels, Weldon also points out that women achieve their long, overdue victories only at great personal costs. In order to put their lives on track, they must often leave their men or abandon their children. Furthermore the word victory itself may elicit the

image in some readers of both victims and victors, with their negative connotation of war and domination. Indeed, Weldon's novels suggest nothing less than a full-scale battle between the sexes with women's autonomy and self-esteem at stake. Victims and victors are in fact strewn across the pages of a Weldon novel as men and women fight for power, dominance, or freedom. Although Pym, Weldon, and Atwood all seek dignity for their characters and harmony between the sexes, Weldon insists in her narratives that combat is often necessary if women are to achieve independence. Therefore, as a result of their rebellion, Weldon's protagonists often pay a higher emotional cost for their achievements than Pym's characters, but in the process they gradually pave the way for their daughters and granddaughters for a more enlightened future, one in which women will have freedoms and respect their mothers never did.

In achieving their victories, one might argue that these protagonists themselves become victimizers, and while it is true that Ruth and Madeleine carry their revenge to extremes, Madeleine finally comes to an understanding that she is just one of many abandoned women and that she must forgive and move on. Ruth's excessive vengeance and her empty victory at the end also attest to the dangers women face if they carry their rage to extremes. Most Weldon protagonists, Chloe and Margot for instance, achieve their much-deserved victories with a modicum of damage to others and eventually bring about a sense of equilibrium for themselves and their children. It is safe to say, then, that the characters' victories, with the exception of Ruth's, are reasonable, healthy, and sane.

Unlike Weldon's protagonists, Atwood's do not achieve victories, especially in her earlier novels. Neither do they adjust to and then accept their disappointing situations, as Pym's do. Moreover, they end their journeys before they have truly absorbed the lessons of

their mythic flight; the heroines in *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, for instance, are just on the brink of entering new stages in their lives. Their situations at the end bring up reservations and questions in the early novels about what the characters will do next. For instance, one wonders in *The Edible Woman*, and *Surfacing* what each protagonist will do after she renounces her victimization. Marian in the first novel gains a new insight that she does not fit into the rampant consumerism she has been trying to assimilate herself into, but simply ending her engagement solves only her immediate problems. She is unemployed at the novel's end and is at cross-purposes with her environment. Atwood simply leaves the ending open because she knows social attitudes are difficult to change and Marian has few choices. Therefore, Atwood sees the events in *The Edible Woman* as a circle with the heroine ending where she began (*Malahat Review* 14).

With each subsequent novel, however, Atwood takes her characters' endings closer to an actual resolution with direction for the next step. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist goes further than Marian by admitting her own complicity in her victimization, then making plans to rectify her problems. Also, Elaine Risley in *Cat's Eye* renounces her childhood victimizers in a most determined way and never looks back until her fifties when she sees that her renunciation had actually been too stringent, and as a result both she and Cordelia had suffered. Atwood protagonists rarely undergo the kind of day-to-day combat with men that Weldon females do because, even though Atwood women similarly suffer from abusive men or repressive social structures, her emphasis is on the psychological development of her characters. Their battles are as intense as those faced by Weldon's women, only the battlefield is the tortured psyche. In each novel, Atwood gradually brings the heroine to a state of consciousness that propels her to break out of her victimization by whatever means are necessary--quitting a job

as the surfacer does; breaking off a destructive relationship as Elaine and Marian do; or taking positive action as Offred does. Despite the fact that their struggles often originate from within, Atwood's protagonists, unlike Pym's, feel they must rebel against men, employers, or governments once they have achieved the psychological strength and insight they had sought. In other words, after the spiritual journey or mental quest has been completed, the character must then put into practice the lessons she has learned.

As Atwood's paradigm shifts away from simple renunciation to resolution, she proves more effective in actually solving her characters' conflicts. Her admonition of the need for action takes her latest novels beyond her earlier ones and produces more satisfying endings of problems that have been satisfactorily resolved. Because Offred makes the cassette tapes at great personal risk in *The Handmaid's Tale*, she manages to leave a message for later generations warning them of the dangers of non-action. After all, she and her loved ones, indeed the whole country, are under the oppressive Gileadean regime because they were too apathetic to prevent the takeover.

With the exception of Atwood's latest novel, the emphasis is not on the actual struggles in the daily lives of the characters, but on how the protagonist reaches the point of recognizing and confronting her personal demons. Like Pym's women, Atwood's heroines are often contemplative and the reverberations of their struggles quiet and private. Also, even though many issues are the same in the novels of both Atwood and Weldon, the sense of on-going battle that exists in Weldon's novels is absent in Atwood's.

Taken together, Pym, Weldon, and Atwood offer constructive ways for their protagonists to break out of their victimization. The emphases and methods are not the same among these authors, but the message is clear that positive action or attitudes enable women

to take more control of their lives. Victory is not always complete or perhaps even healthy; simple acceptance of the shortcomings of life may leave protagonists feeling shortchanged later on; and renunciation may leave characters without a sure footing for the next step of one's journey; however, given life's complexities and imperfections, it is natural to expect qualified victories, healthy amounts of adjustment and acceptance, and renunciations without a character knowing exactly what step to take next. The point is that these women do confront their situations and handle them with available tools or by developing new tools when necessary. Atwood's novels show special promise in the way her characters are slowly developing behaviors that promote their best interests and the interests of all women. Resilience and determination are qualities the characters of Pym, Weldon, and Atwood learn to develop, and in doing so these writers underscore their mutual efforts to improve the status of and conditions for modern women. In addition, Weldon and Atwood especially stress the need for women to rely on one another as they face contemporary dilemmas, but even Pym suggests in the friendship between Wilmet and Mary Beamish that intimacy among women is nourishing and healthy.

Moreover, it is important to appreciate each author for her individual strengths as well. What Pym tries to emphasize that a woman has power over how she perceives her situation. Often she may find blessings in her life which she had not appreciated before. Doubtless there are times in her life when she feels helpless to change the conditions around her and must seek a psychological state of mind that helps her to adjust to things over which she feels she has no control. In contrast, Weldon emphasizes that if a woman rebels against her circumstances, even though it causes temporary turmoil, villification, or insanity, if she persists she will eventually (often with the help of her female friends) find a freer, more satisfying state of being. In doing so, she bravely paves the way for

better conditions for her daughters and granddaughters. Finally, Atwood shows her characters confront their unhappy pasts and move to healthier psychological states as a result of their spiritual quests. Her protagonists learn to find their personal gods or a deep locus which will guide them as they make responsible choices in a world in which women are threatened by gender, social, and environmental exploitation. Reading the novels of Pym, Weldon, and Atwood, one is struck not so much by the fact of victimization in women's lives but by the number of ways writers choose to explore the problem. Whether one decides to accept, renounce, or rebel against her victimization, or to find her own creative solutions, as these authors invite women to do, Pym, Weldon, and Atwood will continue to inspire women to find effective methods to break the ties of their victimization and to improve the world for those that follow.

NOTES

[1] See "Reputations Revisited" in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 Jan. 1977, pp. 66-67.

[2] I have preserved the authors' and critics' exact terms and preferred spellings in quotations.

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