FAIRY TALE ELEMENTS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S NOVELS:

BREAKING THE MAGIC SPELL

THESIS

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This thesis traces Margaret Atwood's uses of three major elements of fairy tales in her novels. Atwood creates a passive, fairy-tale-like heroine, but not for the purpose of showing how passivity wins the prince as in the traditional tale. Atwood also uses the binary system, which provides a moralistic structure in the fairy tale, to show the necessity of moving beyond its rigidity. In addition, Atwood's novels focus on transformation as the breaking of a spell. However, the spell to be broken arises out of the fairy tales themselves, which create unrealistic expectations. Thus, Atwood not only presents these fairy tale elements in a new setting, but she also changes their significance.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood is one of the most prolific writers of our times. She celebrates her forty-sixth birthday in 1985 as the published author of five novels, three short-fiction collections, ten volumes of poetry, one critical book about Canadian literature, two children's books, and numerous articles and book reviews. Because of her output and success, it is no surprise that writing about Atwood's fiction has become a popular pursuit among academics in recent years. In fact, Atwood's listing in the most recent volumes of the MLA bibliography (1982 and 1983) is divided not just into poetry and prose fiction, but into categories for specific works under her name. However, this proliferation of Atwood scholarship does not mean that most of the significant topics have already been explored.

One element of Atwood's fiction that has been mentioned only in passing is her use of fairy tale characters and characteristics.[1] Although references to fairy tales appear in both her fiction and poetry, Atwood's novels develop these references at greater length than her poems. To be sure, a few scholars have compared and contrasted an individual novel to fairy tales,[2] but no one has observed that fairy tale

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characteristics appear in all of the novels. This thesis
examines these fairy tale elements and traces their presence
throughout Atwood's novels. The interpretation set forth is
not meant to discredit other analyses that point out Atwood's
use of Gothic, shamanistic, Amerindian, or romance elements,
to name a few; these sources clearly play an important role
in both her poetry and fiction. The value of this thesis
lies in its attempt to identify another source that informs
Atwood's fiction, and ultimately to show Atwood's purpose in
adapting, rather than merely borrowing from, this source.

The use of fairy tale elements may explain in part why
Atwood's fiction enjoys enormous popularity in the United
States. Although Americans are beginning to show an inter-
est in Canadian literature as a whole, American enthusiasm
for Atwood's work far surpasses that for any of her peers'
work. (How many American readers can name even one other
contemporary Canadian novelist?) This interest seems to be
increasing in spite of the fact that Atwood is conscious of
being a Canadian writer working in a Canadian tradition, and
in spite of the fact that some of her fiction pointedly den-
igrates Americans. One explanation for this paradox is that
beyond the difference in nationality lie references to fairy
tales that both Canadians and Americans are familiar with.
Moreover, in Jungian terms, the fairy tale elements are part
of the collective unconscious, which transcends national

boundaries; therefore, Americans as well as Canadians have come to appreciate Atwood's fiction.

Atwood's work abounds with references to well-known sources of mythological and modern heroes and heroines. Atwood mentions knights, damsels in distress, and dragons; the Brothers Grimm; Hans Christian Anderson's Mermaid; comic book heroes including Superman; The Red Shoes; Walt Disney-- to name a few of the obvious ones. Referring to fairy tale or romantic figures allows Atwood to set up a fantasy/reality dichotomy that is a source of comedy in The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle; at the same time, this dichotomy is a source of serious social commentary in Surfacing, Life Before Man, and Bodily Harm. Although Atwood's two most recent novels stay within realistic boundaries rather than incorporating "strong elements of fantasy" (a distinction that Atwood made in a 1980 interview with Atlantis), these realistic novels still allude to fairy tales. Taken together, the references to fairy tales in Atwood's novels are important for at least two reasons. They expand the survival theme evident through-out Atwood's work. Through their use in her novels, Atwood suggests that the only way to survive is to move beyond the kind of romantic, idealistic notions found in fairy tales. In addition, the fairy tale elements explain why Atwood's protagonists, despite their eccentricities, can seem so fa-miliar.

One of the most important sources of fairy tales is the Brothers Grimm collection. For several reasons, this thesis refers mostly to Grimms' tales rather than to other versions of the same basic stories. One of the most significant reasons for using Grimm as the standard source is the pervasiveness of this collection. The Grimm brothers were the first systematic collectors of folk and fairy tales; consequently, their collection became a model for others to follow.[3] In addition, compared to other fairy tale collections, Grimms' is remembered best, as Kay Stone has shown by interviewing women about their memories of childhood tales: "These tales are so thoroughly accepted that one woman even referred to the Grimm stories as 'English fairy tales'. . ." (43).[4] Grimms' tales were also part of Atwood's childhood. Her mother used to read tales from the Brothers Grimm and Beatrix Potter aloud, and apparently she was such a good storyteller that neighborhood children and even some of their parents would gather at the Atwood house each night to listen (Miner 177, 179).

Atwood's use of specific Grimms' tales is another reason to deem their collection the standard source for this thesis. Grimms' version of Bluebeard (found in Fitchers Vogel, No. 46)[5] appears throughout Atwood's works; it is most obvious in "Bluebeard's Egg," from her short-story collection of that same title, in which the Grimms' tale, almost in its entirety, is recollected. The Bluebeard figure also

is found in Charles Perrault's Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé, avec des Moralitéz; however, as I explain in detail in my article on "Bluebeard's Egg," Atwood consciously uses the Grimms' version rather than Perrault's because the former is more appropriate to the point she wants to make. Another figure from Grimms' tales who finds her way into Atwood's fiction is "The Maiden Without Hands" (Das Mädchen ohne Hände, No. 31). The most obvious reference to this character appears in the person of Rennie's maternal grandmother in Bodily Harm. Well-known tales such as "Hansel and Gretel," "Cinderella," "Little Red Riding Hood" and many others are also alluded to in Atwood's novels; the examples are too numerous to list here. But one particular allusion to a nail-studded cask, which appears in both Surfacing and "Bluebeard's Egg," demonstrates Atwood's great familiarity with Grimms' tales. To quote from "Bluebeard's Egg":

> What if he wakes up one day and decides that
> she isn't the true bride after all, but the
> false one? Then she will be put into a bar-
> rel stuck full of nails and rolled downhill,
> endlessly. . . . (136)

This exact image is found in three of Grimms' tales: Die drei Männlein im Walde (No. 13), Die Gänsemagd (No. 89), and Die weisse und die schwarze Braut (No. 135). In the first tale mentioned above, a false bride has usurped the place of the queen, without the king's knowledge. When he finally discovers the deceit, he lets the false one unknowingly determine her own punishment.

> "What does a person deserve who takes another
> from his bed and throws him into the water?"
> "Nothing less," the old woman [the false bride]
> answered, "than to be put in a cask studded
> with nails on the inside and rolled down hill
> into the water." Then the king said, "You
> have pronounced your own doom. . . ." (54-55)

This image from Grimm demonstrates not only Atwood's knowledge of this collection, but her interest in incorporating elements from these tales in her fiction.

Atwood refers directly to "Grimms' tales" or "German fairy tales" in The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Bluebeard's Egg, and Murder in the Dark. The point of these references is to show that Grimms' tales--unlike the Quebec Folk Tales mentioned in Surfacing or Charles Perrault's sentimental tales mentioned in "Bluebeard's Egg"--can be quite gruesome.[6] For example, the nail-studded cask mentioned above is used in all three of the Grimms' tales to punish false wives. Another example of a gruesome ending is found in the Grimms' version of Cinderella (Aschenputtel, No. 21). The stepsisters do not just cram their feet into the golden slipper; each cuts off part of her foot so that the slipper fits. And, at the end of the tale, the stepsisters are punished for their wickedness by birds' pecking out their eyes. But Bluebeard is perhaps the most important gruesome figure as Atwood makes more allusions to him than to any other fairy tale figure. Bluebeard, of course, is the villain who chops up his wives because of their disobedience and leaves them in a room, which he forbids anyone else to enter. The figure

of Bluebeard suits Atwood's fiction in the sense that many
of her works explore sado-masochistic tendencies found espe-
cially between lovers; that is, Atwood's female characters
are often attracted to inappropriate, sometimes dangerous,
males and tend to remain in these unhealthy relationships
despite their unhappiness. In general, in Grimms' tales the
gruesome images counterbalance the miraculous, good events
that also take place; thus, these fairy tales do not drip
with saccharine sentimentality. Since Atwood has not written
unconditionally happy endings for any of her fiction, Grimms'
fairy tales, better than any other source, suit her novels.

In addition to their explicit, gruesome details, Grimms'
tales are noted for the element of transformation, which
plays a significant role in at least half of the 200 tales
in the collection. Transformation is also a key element in
Atwood's fiction. In a 1977 interview, when asked about the
emphasis on transformation and evolution in her work, Atwood
drew a direct connection between her writing and Grimms'
tales:

> You could link it with my childhood reading;
> most fairy tales and religious stories involve
> miraculous changes of shape. Grimm's [sic]
> tales, Greek and Celtic legends, have them.
> . . .I would say that Grimm's Fairy Tales was
> the most influential book I ever read. (Sand-
> ler 14)

Although scholarly articles often refer to the importance of
transformation in Atwood's fiction, none has fully explored
the connection between Grimm and Atwood in this respect.

Although this thesis relies on Grimms' tales as a primary source, its aim is not to research and analyze all of the allusions to Grimm found in Atwood's fiction. Rather, its purpose is to use Grimms' tales to exemplify traditional fairy tale elements by which to compare the treatment of these elements in Atwood's novels. Neither does this thesis propose to pronounce judgment on the question of whether fairy tales adversely or beneficially affect the development of a personality. Rather, it observes only that Margaret Atwood sides with those writers who have criticized the influence of fairy tales.[7] Which side Atwood is on, however, does not make her novels either good or bad. Any aesthetic judgments should be based on how well she handles the fairy tale elements she borrows, but that type of evaluation is also beyond the scope of this study.

This thesis examines a literary genre that Atwood is obviously familiar with--the fairy tale--and traces its elements throughout her novels. Three major fairy tale elements provide the organizational basis of the following chapters. Chapter One is devoted to the passive heroine found in traditional fairy tales. In Atwood's scheme of things, however, passivity does not lead to marrying the prince. Chapter Two explores the binary system that provides a moralistic structure in fairy tales. This system is fixed and binding in traditional tales, but Atwood emphasizes the rigidity of the system to show the necessity of moving beyond it.[8] Chapter

Four deals with transformation, an element that creates many of the happy endings of fairy tales. Atwood, in contrast, finds that there are limitations on the possibility that transformation can lead to happiness.

As folktale scholar Max Lüthi notes, the quality that makes the fairy tale adaptable, allowing it to take shape in different versions, is its timelessness. Lüthi asserts that the phrase "once upon a time" is not intended to place the fairy tale in a time long ago, but to emphasize that the same events could happen even today, tomorrow, or next week (Once Upon a Time 47). Yet Atwood does not simply borrow or update fairy tale elements from Grimm and others; she transforms them to suit her own purpose. For example, in the short story "Bluebeard's Egg," which includes in the story-line the tale from Grimm upon which it is based, Atwood does not simply move the age-old tale to a modern setting; she also changes the point of the original story. Instead of illustrating how female curiosity leads to destruction, as does the original tale, Atwood's story affirms that curiosity can lead to personal insight, which transforms the protagonist's view of her husband and of the world around her.

Perhaps the most important alteration from tradition Atwood makes in her novels is to shift the emphasis from the hero to the heroine. When asked to comment on the importance of women writers in creating fiction that reflects women's roles in modern society, Atwood said: "I think the thing to

do with a mythology is not to discard the mythology at all, but to transform it, rearrange it and shift the values" (Var-seveld 67). All of Atwood's female protagonists have been nurtured by romantic images of relationships, love, and marriage created in part by fairy tales from childhood. Her novels, however, demonstrate the impossibility of living a full, healthy life while remaining committed to these romantic notions. Ultimately, Atwood's purpose is to break the magic spell that fairy tales have perpetuated; exactly how she does that is the subject of this thesis.

CHAPTER II

THE PASSIVE HEROINE

> Woman is the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow-
> White, she who receives and submits. In song
> and story the young man is seen departing ad-
> venturously in search of woman; he slays the
> dragon, he battles giants; she is locked in a
> tower, a palace, a garden, a cave, she is
> chained to a rock, a captive, sound asleep:
> she waits.
>   --Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex

One of the major elements of the fairy tale is its cast
of characters. The most important characters are the hero
and heroine, who have become so familiar to readers that
they now stand as a cliché for romantic, idealistic lovers.
The fairy tale hero and heroine, in many ways, are related
to the knight-in-shining-armor/damsel-in-distress mythic
pattern from the medieval ages. The typical fairy tale hero-
ine acquiesces in a predicament, and the typical hero rescues
her. The best-remembered fairy tales adhere to these char-
acter types: Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, The
Maiden Without Hands, to name a few. All are beautiful wom-
en saved from their predicaments by a princely or heroic
man.[1] In short, the fairy tale hero is defined by his actions;
the fairy tale heroine is defined by her passivity. Or, as
Kay Stone puts it, the heroine is but the hero does (45).

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The correlation between gender and the ability to take
action in the traditional fairy tale is also evident in
Margaret Atwood's fiction. Atwood, however, is not content
simply to carry on tradition. Although the heroine begins
each novel as almost a stereotypical passive female, she
undergoes a change of character as the plot unfolds. In
effect, Atwood's heroines discover that the prince does not
exist outside themselves, but within. This chapter analyzes
the first part of this process: discovering the perils of
passivity. A discussion of transformation, the second part
of the process, is reserved for a later chapter.

Kay Stone identifies basic characteristics of a fairy
tale heroine: beauty, patience, obedience, industriousness,
and most important--passivity (43-44). To confirm the accu-
racy of this list, all one need do is to look closely at some
of the more popular heroines.

Beauty is an obvious trait of the fairy tale heroine.
In Snow White's case, beauty actually causes her predicament;
when Snow White reaches the age of seven (according to Grimms'
Dornröschen) she becomes "'the fairest in all the land,'"
according to the mirror, thus making her stepmother danger-
ously jealous. Even when the heroine's beauty is not evident
at the beginning of a fairy tale, as is the case with Cinder-
ella and other heroines who are servants, a mere change of
occupation or clothing is enough to reveal her true beauty.

Although Margaret Atwood's heroines are not necessarily stunning beauties--as we might expect a fairy tale princess to be--they are all concerned about their appearance. For instance, in The Edible Woman, Marian takes great pains to dress up for Peter's party. She has her hair done, takes a ritualistic bubble bath, gets a manicure, puts on dramatic makeup, dons a bright red cocktail dress, and is adorned by some of Ainsley's flamboyant jewelry. The narrator of Surfacing learns about the importance of looking good from her "friend" Anna, who rises earlier than her husband so that she can put on her face because he does not like to see her without makeup. A few scenes later, Anna describes her childhood fantasy: "'I thought I was really a princess and I'd end up living in a castle. They shouldn't let kids have stuff like that'" (67). Although Anna does not escape the trap of having to look beautiful for her prince, she at least recognizes that beauty is a trap. The narrator of Surfacing shares Anna's attitudes. The narrator's drawings from when she was ten depict "Ladies in exotic costumes, sausage rolls of hair across their foreheads, with puffed red mouths and eyelashes like toothbrush bristles" (49). The narrator explains these drawings by saying, "when I was ten I believed in glamour, it was a kind of religion and these were my icons" (49). The illustrations she makes as an adult are along the same lines. She is supposed to illustrate a collection called Quebec Folk Tales, but she has trouble

capturing the "fashion-model torso and infantile face" (62) of the perfect princess. In fact, in one attempt, the princess ends up "crosseyed and has one breast bigger than the other" (62). Atwood clearly points out that ideal beauty is hard to depict, let alone to emulate.

This generalization would certainly be affirmed by Joan Delacourt Foster, the heroine of Lady Oracle, who balloons to gargantuan size during her teenage years, rebelling against a mother who expected her to grow up to be a princess. Joan understands only too well that being fat means being ignored or persecuted socially. At one point she ponders, "If Desdemona was fat who would care whether or not Othello strangled her?" (53). But in her late teens Joan loses weight because of a stipulation in her aunt's will, and from that point on her life starts to take on a fairy tale quality in the fantastic events that happen to her. Most significant is her discovery of an occupation that suits her: she becomes a perpetuator of fairy tale fantasies, a Gothic-novel writer. Describing her craft, Joan draws a connection between her fictional heroines and her real-life readers: "The heroines of my books were mere stand-ins: their features were never clearly defined, their faces were putty which each reader could reshape into her own, adding a little beauty" (34). Her readers are women who want to be princesses. They may not be beautiful in reality, but Joan can make them feel beautiful vicariously by tailoring her novels to their

unfulfilled fantasies.

> Now I could play fairy godmother to them,
> despite their obvious defects, their calves
> which were too skinny, those disfiguring hairs
> on their upper lips, much deplored in cramped
> ads at the backs of movie magazines, their
> elbows knobby as chickens' knees. I had the
> power to turn them from pumpkins to pure gold.
> (35)

Joan knows that any woman who aspires to be a fairy tale her-

oine must first be beautiful. Unfortunately for her readers,

however, Joan has the power to turn them into "pure gold"

only in the imagination, not in reality.

The importance of beauty to the heroine is reiterated

in Atwood's most recent novels in spite of (or perhaps be-

cause of, considering that our society is so materialistic

and fashion conscious) their realistic qualities. In Life

Before Man, Nate recalls thinking of Elizabeth, his wife, as

"a Madonna in a shrine" (49), that is--luminescent and beau-

tiful. He projects this same image onto his new lover, Lesje:

"In the bedroom he's beginning to think of as theirs, she

glimmers like a thin white moon for him alone. By seeing

how beautiful she is he's made her beautiful" (246). In

this instance, the woman does not even have the capability

of making herself beautiful; the man makes her beautiful by

his desire for her.

Rennie, the lifestyle writer and heroine of Bodily Harm,

also knows that if a woman wants to attract and keep a man

she is expected to look good physically. After Rennie has a

partial mastectomy, she has difficulty continuing her rela-
tionship with her lover, Jake, or forming a new one because
she recognizes--as does the narrator of Surfacing--that a
princess needs a perfect, beautiful body. Jake tries to
reassure her, calling her his "golden shiksa" (178), but
Rennie realizes he is already involved with someone else.

In addition to being beautiful, typical fairy tale her-
oines are patient, obedient, and industrious. Take Cinderella
for example. She not only submits graciously to work as a
servant in her father's house, but she also does not utter
an unkind word even when her stepmother twice requires her
to pick out the lentils from the ashes (in Grimms' version,
Aschenputtel) before she will be allowed to attend the ball.
Cinderella accomplishes these tasks--her industriousness aid-
ed by a flock of birds--yet her stepmother still refuses to
allow her to go to the ball because she lacks an appropriate
dress. Patient through all these frustrations, Cinderella
never loses her temper or disobeys her stepmother's command.
Supplied with a fine dress of gold and silver and slippers
made of silk given to her by the magical hazel bush growing
by her mother's grave, Cinderella manages to attend the ball
while adhering perfectly to her stepmother's stipulation.

The tale of Snow White is another illustration of the
importance of patience, obedience, and industriousness to the
fairy tale heroine. When her stepmother becomes jealous of
her beauty and plots to kill her, Snow White does not complain

to her father or seek to mitigate the situation in a direct way; instead she flees from their house, thus exemplifying the passive, patient heroine who endures or escapes from the intolerable situation without confronting it. In exchange for food and shelter, Snow White agrees to keep house for the seven dwarves. This job involves cooking, cleaning, sewing, knitting, and so on. Snow White is a paragon of industriousness. Her downfall, however, comes when she does not strictly obey the dwarves' command to bar any stranger from entering the house while they are away working during the day. Snow White three times disobeys their order when her stepmother in disguise comes to the door, and the third time the stepmother's magic apple proves to be too potent a trick for the dwarves to dispel. Snow White sleeps lifelessly in a glass coffin until a prince accidentally rescues her, but the perils of disobedience are clearly portrayed in her story.

Atwood's heroines exhibit most of the virtues expected of a fairy tale princess, and even when they do not exemplify the ideal behavior, they at least know that patience, obedience, and industriousness are essential character traits. Marian of The Edible Woman exhibits these traits when she is at work and with Peter, her fiance. For example, when she comes in late for work one morning, Marian knows that everyone has noticed her tardiness. She also realizes that she should skip her morning coffee break to make up the time;

she does not, but she at least knows she should. With Peter,

Marian tries to be the picture of patience and obedience,

catering to his whims whether they be making love in the

bathtub or accepting his marriage proposal against her intu-

ition. One scene shows Marian at her best princess behavior.

Peter complains about the dinner that Marian has fixed be-

cause it consists of frozen food that has been warmed up.

He grumbles, "'Why can't you ever cook anything?'" Marian's

reaction is unsurprising:

> I was hurt: I considered this unfair.
> I like to cook, but I had been deliberately
> refraining at Peter's [apartment] for fear
> he would feel threatened. Besides, he had
> always liked smoked meat before, and it was
> perfectly nourishing. I was about to make
> a sharp comment, but repressed it. (64)

Like the fairy tale heroine, Marian shows patience and is

even-tempered when dealing with her prince.

The narrator of Surfacing, like Marian, does not always

fulfill the ideal qualities of the fairy tale princess, but

she knows what these expectations are. She knows that she

should tell Joe, her lover, that she loves him in response

to his declaration, yet she holds back. Her patience is

shown in her willingness to listen to David's prejudiced po-

litical notions without overt judgment. Her industriousness

is evident from the moment the party of four arrives in back-

woods northern Canada; she takes care of selecting the sup-

plies they will need, cooking, making the beds, cleaning,

and so on. Her industriousness resembles Snow White's; however, Atwood's narrator is not saved by a prince.

The heroine of Lady Oracle is a more complex character than her counterparts in Atwood's first two novels. Around her mother, Joan is the antithesis of the patient, obedient, industrious princess. Around Arthur, however, Joan at least tries to measure up to these qualities. She is patient when Arthur discovers a new political cause, and her patience endures even when he becomes disillusioned with it. Joan's obedience is best shown by her consenting to marry Arthur; getting married is his idea and he has to give quite a speech to convince her. She then waits four years to go on a honeymoon to separatist Quebec (Arthur's choice), during which time they stay in a hotel room equipped with a television set that will not work unless someone (Joan, of course) puts one hand on the bunny-ears antenna and the other on the wall. At home Joan keeps busy managing the household for herself and Arthur--trying to cook, clean, and also write her Gothic novels. However, she cannot adequately fulfill all the expectations placed on her, which is why she runs away from Toronto to Terremoto, all the while feeling guilty for her failure.

Lesje, the character who most clearly fits the princess mold in Life Before Man, also feels guilty for not meeting all the expectations placed on her. Her job at the Royal Ontario Museum as the assistant to a paleontologist involves

many tedious duties, such as classifying small protomammal teeth from the Upper Cretaceous. At this job, Lesje exercises the patience and industriousness expected of a princess type. At home, however, Lesje is inept. She feels guilty for not being the good cook William expects her to be, and later in the novel, she feels guilty around Nate and his children because she does not know how to fulfill their expectations of her. She also worries about losing the prince, Nate, because of her request to see more of just him and less of his children. Because a princess never complains, Lesje feels guilty when she does.

Unlike Lesje, who takes solace in her job, Rennie, the heroine of Bodily Harm, finds that she cannot finish the free-lance assignments she takes after her mastectomy. Her beauty goes; her industriousness follows. She resembles Marian of The Edible Woman in her willingness to satisfy her lover's needs, which sometimes involve sexual high jinks. But after Rennie's operation, her willingness to be patient and obedient to Jake also disappears. Because she knows that princesses should be docile and good-natured, Rennie feels guilty about her lack thereof. And one of her childhood memories contributes to this sense of guilt. Rennie recalls that her grandmother was always "proud of the fact that she never lost her temper" (53), and the grandmother expected Rennie to follow her example. But Rennie, like any other child, was not perfect and could not always keep an even temper. One

day she cried in front of her grandmother, and as punishment, the grandmother locked her in the basement until she could control herself. This experience impressed upon Rennie the importance of adhering strictly to behavioral expectations.

Atwood discusses her less-than-perfect heroines in an interview conducted during the time she was working on Bod- ily Harm:

> Let's face it--women are not angels. . . .
> Who wants to be an angel? Especially if you
> aren't one. It gives you cancer. I some-
> times get criticized for making my female
> characters not huge towers of strength and
> goodness. Well, I don't know anybody like
> that. I know some pretty interesting wom-
> en but part of the thing that makes them
> interesting is the fact that they are not
> monolithically perfect. They deal with
> those imperfections as human beings.
> ("An Atlantis Interview" 208)

In other words, real women are not successful at being fairy tale princesses. Nor should they try to be. Atwood's com- ment demonstrates that she is consciously aware of dealing with the unrealistic expectations placed on women to be an- gels or, in the terms of this thesis, princesses. The hero- ine of Bodily Harm gets cancer because she worries about not being the ideal woman. Her cancer is the most tangible sign among Atwood's heroines that trying to live in today's world while operating under the assumption that fairy tales can come true is deadly.

The most characteristic attribute of the fairy tale her- oine is her passivity. Why is this attribute so prevalent?

Marcia Lieberman argues that a cause-and-effect relation between beauty and passivity exists in the fairy tale: "The beautiful girl does not have to do anything to merit being chosen; she does not have to show pluck, resourcefulness, or wit; she is chosen because she is beautiful" (386). The heroine's task in the fairy tale is not to solve her own problems, but to wait for a prince to see or hear about her beauty so that she will be rescued (rewarded by being chosen) by him. This pattern is apparent in most popular fairy tales; consider Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella as just two examples.

Adapted slightly, this pattern is also found in Atwood's novels. Atwood does not draw a causal connection between being beautiful and winning the prince, but she does examine the belief that all a woman needs to do is to wait for her prince to rescue her. The Edible Woman's heroine says outright: "I'd always assumed through highschool and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does" (104). Getting married is not necessarily equivalent to being rescued by a prince, but in this case it is. Marian's coworkers and employer see it in that light; in fact, Marian is congratulated for having to give up her job after she is married. Peter not only rescues her from having to work, he also rescues her from having to find another apartment and roommate (a result of Ainsley's pregnancy). Marian is supposed to be grateful to him, and she tries to be, but she is not successful.

The narrator of Surfacing recalls a similar assumption: "at school when they asked you what you were going to be when you grew up, you said 'A lady' or 'A mother,' either one was safe; and it wasn't a lie, I did want to be those things" (109). The assumption that all girls must grow up to be ladies (perhaps meaning married women) or mothers becomes so deeply ingrained in the narrator's mind that she deludes herself into thinking that she has been married to a man she really has had only an affair with and that she has had a baby when in fact she has had an abortion. Through this character's experience, Atwood shows that waiting to be rescued by a prince can warp a personality.

Like the two previously discussed heroines, Joan Delacourt Foster realizes that most girls expect to be rescued through marriage to a prince. But since she spends her teenage years being grossly overweight, she is allowed to examine this expectation from a distance. She observes that her high school girlfriends "who got married too young, who had babies too early, who wanted princes and castles. . .ended up with cramped apartments and grudging husbands" (102-103). Joan even realizes that some fairy tales depict princesses who fail and have tragic endings. For example, the Little Mermaid in Hans Christian Anderson's tale and Moira Shearer in The Red Shoes: "Neither of them had been able to please the handsome prince; both of them had died" (241). Nevertheless, when Joan loses weight she begins to look for a prince. She

looks to the Polish count to rescue her from the damp, mil-
dewy, dismal room she has rented from a snoopy, intolerant
landlord. She then sees Arthur as the man who can rescue
her from the count, who has become overly possessive. The
vicious circle continues as Joan later searches for someone
to rescue her from Arthur. Despite these experiences, Joan
comments near the end of the novel: "I longed for happy end-
ings, I needed the feeling of release when everything turned
out right and I could scatter joy like rice all over my char-
acters and dismiss them into bliss" (352). "Rice" functions
as a synecdoche for marriage in this quotation. But Joan
does not look to marriage as the ultimate form of rescue
just for her characters; this assumption carries through to
her real life as Joan casts the journalist who discovers her
hideout in Terremoto in the role of potential rescuer.

Life Before Man presents a more complex perspective on
the prince as rescuer than do the previous novels because
its complex narrative strategy delves into the hearts and
minds of three individuals. Nate and Elizabeth are disillu-
sioned about the idea of rescue. Nate thinks of knights and
the chivalric ideal of taking care of a woman as notions
from a "bygone romantic era" (15). Likewise, Elizabeth notes
on Halloween night, when the children are carrying UNICEF
containers to "save the children," that "Adults, as usual,
[are] forcing the children to do the saving, knowing how in-
capable of it they are themselves" (51). But Lesje is not

as jaded as these other characters. She still believes in
the prince and wants Nate to fill that role:

> Holding her two hands he [Nate] says, "You
> know how important you are to me." When she
> wants him to say he would kill for her, die
> for her. If he would only say that, she
> would do anything for him. But how impor-
> tant invites measurement, the question: How
> important? For her Nate is absolute, but
> for him she exists on a scale of relatively
> important things. She can't tell exactly
> where on the scale she is; it fluctuates.
> (222)

Lesje wants Nate to take care of her and to care for her more
than anything or anyone else, but disillusioned Nate cannot
be the perfect prince although he does rescue her from a
stifling relationship with William, her former lover. What
Lesje wants is to be married and to have children; that, she
feels, will make everything right:

> she wants to be classifiable, a member of a
> group. There is already a group of Mrs.
> Schoenhofs: one is Nate's mother, the other
> is the mother of his children. Lesje isn't
> the mother of anyone; officially she is
> nothing. (267)

Ultimately, Lesje tries to force Nate to be her prince, her
rescuer, when she stops taking her contraceptive and becomes
pregnant. However, so bleak is the mood of Life Before Man
that one cannot believe Lesje and Nate will live happily
ever after.

The heroine of Bodily Harm is also disillusioned about
having a prince rescue her:

> Once upon a time Rennie was able to pre-
> dict men; she'd been able to tell exactly what
> a given man would do at a given time. When
> she'd known that, when she was sure, all she
> had to do was <u>wait</u> and then he would <u>do</u> it.
> She used to <u>think</u> she knew what most men were
> like, she used to think she knew what most
> men wanted and how most men would respond.
> She used to think there was such a thing as
> most men, and now she doesn't. (214; empha-
> sis mine)

Rennie thinks her fairy tale illusions are part of the past,
but her experiences show otherwise. She casts her doctor in
the role of prince, expecting him to rescue her from the
ravages of cancer. Then she expects Paul to rescue her from
being out of touch with her own body, first of all, and from
prison, at the end of the novel. He successfully completes
only the first task. Her thoughts while Paul is negotiating
for her release from Marsdon, the rebel leader, even reflect
fairy tale imagery: "Rennie can see what she is now: She's
an object of negotiation. The truth about knights comes
suddenly clear: The maidens were only an excuse. The dragon
was the real business" (228). Her thoughts at this point do
not reveal any insight or movement beyond romantic, fairy
tale ideals; instead, they show Rennie's perturbation--like
Lesje's--at not commanding the prince's absolute attention
and affection. Rennie is not the only character in <u>Bodily
Harm</u> to expect the prince to be a rescuer. Lora's lover is
actually called Prince; he is the leader of a rebel force,
whom the people of Ste. Agathe look to as a savior. He is
unsuccessful in this role for his countrymen and for Lora.

Through him, Atwood shows that the ideal is not possible in today's world.

In addition to wishing to be rescued from their distress by a prince, Atwood's heroines display other symptoms of passivity. Although he does not associate their symptoms with fairy tales, critic Frank Davey at least notices that "Atwood's narrators are marked by extreme passivity" (213). He does not overstate his case in using the word "extreme." Passivity is the trademark of the Atwood heroine; its symptoms create the eccentricities of each heroine.

For example, in The Edible Woman Marian has some very odd reactions to her predicament. She crawls under a bed, hiding herself from view, while socializing at a friend's house. This behavior can best be explained as passive withdrawal; during the evening, she has glimpsed a part of Peter --his hunter's instinct--that she did not know existed, but rather than confronting it or him, she withdraws from his company. Marian's way of coping directly with Peter is to allow him to make all of the important decisions--another passive response. Her lack of involvement with the wedding also demonstrates her passivity:

> She could feel time eddying and curling almost
> visibly around her feet, rising around her,
> lifting her body in the office-chair and bear-
> ing her, slowly and circuitously but with the
> inevitability of water moving downhill, towards
> the distant, not-too-distant-anymore day they
> had agreed on--in late March?--that would end
> this phase and begin another. Somewhere else,

arrangements were being gradually made; the
relatives were beginning to organize their
forces and energies, it was all being taken
care of, there was nothing for her to do.
(118)

The stylistics of this passage are important since they under-
score the idea that Marian regards even her upcoming wedding
with passivity. Marian is the subject of the first sentence,
but since several dependent clauses amplify "time," the ac-
tions of this abstract noun are emphasized more than Marian's
feeling. Time--rather than her own actions--is drawing Mari-
an towards her wedding day, a date of which Marian remains
vague and uncertain. The second sentence is a passive con-
struction, the doer of the action not being named even
obliquely. The subsequent subjects of the second sentence--
"relatives," "it," and the false subject "there"--further
reinforce the idea that Marian feels very little involvement
with her wedding. The most extreme form of Marian's passiv-
ity comes midway through the novel: she gradually stops
eating certain types of food--first meat, then vegetables,
pudding, cake, and so on. Not eating is a passive, indirect
way for Marian to acknowledge that she has a major problem
to confront: she should not be marrying her prince Peter.
The form of the novel also emphasizes Marian's passivity.
The first section of the novel, leading up to the point when
Marian and Peter become engaged, is narrated in first person.
The second section, containing the planning of the wedding

up until Marian breaks off the engagement by frightening
Peter with her edible-woman cake, has a third-person narra-
tor, even though Marian is still the character through whom
the reader sees the action. The third section returns to
first-person narration as Marian is free of the trap of mar-
riage, thereby becoming free to make her own decisions once
again.

Form is also important in Surfacing as a means of show-
ing the narrator's passivity. Like The Edible Woman, the
novel has three parts. Part one has present-tense narration,
part two has past-tense narration, and part three returns to
present tense (with a few exceptions). The shift in tense
is significant because in her mind the narrator has rewrit-
ten the past to avoid confronting the reality that she had
to have an abortion, a result of her affair with a married
man. To maintain this passive avoidance of the past, the
narrator detaches her mind from her body. She lives mostly
through her mind, remaining numb to her lover's touch both
physically and emotionally. As in The Edible Woman, Atwood
deglamorizes passivity as a feminine virtue by showing its
effect on the heroine's life and psyche.

Of all of Atwood's novels, Lady Oracle seems to focus
most on passive ways to avoid confrontation, some of them
being humorous because they are so extreme. For example,
Joan's way of confronting her mother's expectations of her is
very indirect; she eats continuously, putting on as much

weight as possible because her mother wants her to be thin. Even when her mother sticks a knife into her (Joan's) arm, Joan quite calmly discusses trivial things, then goes up-stairs to pack her bags, leaving home not to return until after her mother is dead. Another quality emphasizing her passivity is Joan's ability to listen. In high school, she listens to her girlfriends' laments and praises of boys as a form of vicarious involvement. Later, she finds herself lis-tening to the count's life story, to Arthur's self-doubts and political frustrations; meanwhile, she never has, or does not take, the opportunity to talk about herself. Not that she would tell the truth if she had the opportunity anyway, for Joan's extreme form of passivity is her ability to lie, or to make up a fictional life story. She is the once-obese Joan Delacourt to some people; Joan Foster, wife of Arthur, to others; and Louise K. Delacourt to those who read her nov-els. To avoid confronting the problems of one life, Joan simply pours her energy into another persona. As the novel develops, Joan's need for a fantasy life created vicariously through the actions of her fictional characters intensifies. Her passivity is maintained by her devotion to writing Gothic novels, which is one reason why she notes at the end of the novel, "I won't write any more Costume Gothics. . .I think they were bad for me" (379).

Atwood herself turned from the fantasy, sometimes melo-drama, of her first novels to realism in Life Before Man and

Bodily Harm, but the heroine's passivity remains unchanged.
Like Joan, the heroine of Life Before Man uses fantasy to
maintain her passivity. Lesje, however, does not write fan-
tasies; she instead dreams about dinosaurs. Her daydreams
are treated as unreal, unlike in Lady Oracle, in which the
lines between fantasy and reality are so blurry at times that
it is difficult to distinguish between them. In Lesje's
case, a psychological term--"regressing" (19)--is even given
to her eccentricity to show a logical, realistic reason for
it. Lesje justifies her daydreams about dinosaurs as being
more satisfying than her daydreams about men in the follow-
ing passage:

> Right now men means William. William regards
> them both as settled. He sees no reason why
> anything should ever change. Neither does
> Lesje, when she considers it. Except that she
> can no longer daydream about William, even
> when she tries; nor can she remember what the
> daydreams were like when she did have them.
> A daydream about William is somehow a contra-
> diction in terms. She doesn't attach much
> importance to this fact. (19)

Although Lesje is unaware of her avoidance, it is obvious
from this passage that her fantasy life involving dinosaurs
is a way of sidestepping problems in her relationship with
William and later with Nate.

The heroine's passivity is given a realistic basis also
in Bodily Harm. Quite simply, cancer leads to Rennie's in-
activity. After her mastectomy, Rennie cannot, or does not
want to, be touched; she also cannot write to earn her living.

She thinks flying to two picturesque tropical islands on a travel-feature assignment will get her back on the right track, but the trip is really a concrete symbol of Rennie's avoidance tactics. In particular, she wants to travel to get away from the anonymous man who left an ominous rope in her apartment. The trip enables her to run away from her problems, rather than to face them. Even before her operation, however, Rennie has been a master of passivity. She is a journalist known for her pieces on lifestyles and fads; in other words, by concentrating on the superficial, Rennie is able to stay uninvolved, or passive, in relation to the world and the people around her. Passivity has dangerous consequences, though, when it is unchecked.

Perhaps the most extreme form of passivity is victimization or martyrdom. Two fairy tales that present archetypal victimized heroines are "The Maiden without Hands" and the "Bluebeard" legend (Das Mädchen ohne Hände and Fitchers Vogel in Grimms' collection). In the former tale, a poor miller promises to give the devil whatever is standing behind his mill at that very moment in exchange for enormous wealth. Unfortunately the miller thinks the devil is referring to an apple tree, but his daughter is actually standing behind the mill. When the devil comes to claim the girl three years later, she surrounds herself with a magic circle and washes herself very clean so that the devil will not have any power over her. She is so successful that the devil

instructs the miller to chop off her hands so that she can
no longer cleanse herself. The father does, but because the
daughter sheds so many tears she again gets quite clean, and
the devil gives up, frustrated that he cannot claim her.
The girl then leaves home and eventually meets a prince, whom
she marries. Her troubles are not over, however. She gives
birth to a son while the prince is away. The message announc-
ing the birth is intercepted by the devil, still angry at the
girl, who substitutes a letter saying that the offspring is
a changeling. The prince's reply is intercepted also, and
substituted for it is a note commanding the queen and child
to be put to death. They flee however, and the prince comes
home later to discover the malicious intervention. He
searches for his wife and child for seven years, when he
comes to a lonely hut where a beautiful woman and her son
live and finds that the good Lord has rewarded the queen's
virtue by allowing her hands to grow back.

This plot exemplifies the kind of tale that Marcia
Lieberman warns against: "Because victimized girls. . .are
invariably rescued and rewarded, indeed glorified [in fairy
tales], children learn that suffering goodness can afford to
remain meek, and need not and perhaps should not strive to
defend itself. . ." (390). Atwood has discussed victimiza-
tion as part of the Canadian world view at length in her
critical work Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Liter-
ature. In an interview with Graeme Gibson, Atwood relates

this theme to her novels:

> If you define yourself as innocent then nothing
> is ever your fault--it is always somebody else
> doing it to you, and until you stop defining
> yourself as a victim that will always be true.
> It will always be somebody else's fault, and
> you will always be the object of that rather
> than somebody who has any choice or takes
> responsibility for their life. And that is
> not only the Canadian stance towards the
> world, but the usual female one.   (22)

This comment draws an important connection between passivity--

not making choices or taking responsibility--and victimiza-

tion for Atwood. We have already seen that Atwood's heroines

are passive like fairy tale heroines; they also can become

victims, as do fairy tale heroines. Marian MacAlpin sees

herself as Peter's prey. The narrator of Surfacing thinks

of the forced abortion as a kind of victimization. Joan Fos-

ter is blackmailed by Fraser Buchanan and victimized by an

anonymous person who writes threatening notes and leaves a

dead porcupine on her doorstep. Lesje is raped by William.

Rennie is thrown into prison. In Atwood's novels, unlike in

fairy tales, passivity is not rewarded; victimization is not

glorified, but portrayed in horror.

Atwood also draws upon the Bluebeard legend to present

the perils of passivity. In Grimms' version of the tale,

the Bluebeard figure is a wizard, who chops up two sisters

for disobeying his command not to enter the forbidden room.

The third sister also disobeys his command, but being clever,

she has also disregarded another command to carry his precious

egg with her everywhere she goes; consequently, she does not have it with her when she enters the room, and therefore it does not become stained with blood as it had for her two sisters. The clever girl not only outwits the wizard, but she also brings her sisters back to life by fitting together the parts of their bodies.

The clever sister is an exception, compared with other fairy tale heroines, in her ability to take action. The Bluebeard tale is also remarkable in the fact that the husband is a villain instead of a prince, as is the case in most fairy tales. Atwood refers to the Bluebeard legend throughout her novels. In fact, in Lady Oracle, the narrator directly refers to the Grimms' version of Bluebeard:

> In a fairy tale I would be one of the two stu-
> pid sisters who open the forbidden door and
> are shocked by the murdered wives, not the third,
> clever one who keeps to the essentials: presence
> of mind, foresight, the telling of watertight
> lies. (170)

The most important parallel between the Bluebeard legend and Atwood's novels, however, is that in both of them the woman learns to fear the man who has power over her. In most fairy tales, the prince saves the woman from a predicament, but in Atwood's novels, the prince is part of the predicament. Even if the heroines are not aware of it, the reader knows that Marian and Peter, the narrator of Surfacing and Joe, Joan and Arthur, Lesje and Nate, Rennie and Jake or Paul will not live happily ever after. At times these

heroines fear their lovers and/or the power the men wield
over them.   Images of dismemberment abound in the novels,
borrowed from the Bluebeard legend.   The epigraph to Bodily
Harm, taken from John Berger's Ways of Seeing, capsulizes
this fear: "A man's presence suggests what he is capable of
doing to you or for you.   By contrast, a woman's presence
. . .defines what can and cannot be done to her."   Just as
this quotation succinctly describes the Bluebeard and the
prince figure as negative and positive power wielders, so
does it emphasize a major theme in Atwood's fiction: women
have the power to choose whether or not they will be victims.
As Sherrill Grace observes, "To acquiesce in victimization,
whether psychological as in Surfacing or physical as in Bod-
ily Harm. . .is to accept as real the illusion of passivity"
("Articulating the 'Space Between'" 13).   To stop being vic-
tims, the heroines must relinquish their passivity, which
means giving up their roles as princesses.   And this kind of
transformation is not easily achieved.

CHAPTER III

A BINARY WORLD

> . . .we are men, we demand
> that the world be logical, don't we?
> --Gwendolyn MacEwen, Terror and Erebus[1]

Fairy tales are distinguished not only by their prince-
hero and princess-heroine, but also by their world view. In
the fairy tale world, extreme contrasts dominate. For exam-
ple, Cinderella is beautiful, her stepsisters are ugly.
Cinderella is industrious, her stepsisters lazy. Cinderella
is kind, her stepsisters malicious. Sometimes these extreme
contrasts take the form of adjectives: black/white, dark/
light, aggressive/passive, rich/poor, stupid/clever, bad/
good, cowardly/courageous. Characters, too, may be used as
contrasts: the false bride vs. the true bride, the step-
mother (or stepsister) vs. the princess, the unsuccessful
brother vs. the successful brother-hero, the girl who returns
home covered with gold vs. the girl who returns covered with
pitch (Frau Holle, No. 24). The choices the characters are
given also may involve contrasts; for example, the hero can
either perform an impossible task and win the princess or
can fail and be put to death. In other instances, the fates
of the characters are extreme opposites: Cinderella moves
from rags to riches and lives happily ever after; in contrast

her stepsisters end up disfigured (one cutting off a toe,
the other a heel) from trying to fit into the slipper, and
then have their eyes pecked out (Aschenputtel, No. 21).
Aschenputtel also illustrates that the systematic laws of
fairy tales do not have to be expressed to be understood.
For example, like Perrault's Cinderella, Grimms' Aschenputtel
rushes home at midnight, but unlike Cinderella, Aschenputtel
has not been commanded to be home by then or else find her-
self disenchanted in front of everyone at the festival. As
these examples show, binary oppositions (to borrow a term
from the structuralists) are an integral part of the fairy
tale world.

A similar world view is found in Margaret Atwood's nov-
els. Although they do not employ the exact contrasts found
in fairy tales, her novels do depict a world dominated by
binary oppositions. Edible or non-edible, predator or prey
are just two of the contrasts found in The Edible Woman.
The oppositions in Surfacing include victor against victim,
thought against feeling, logic against intuition, Americans
against Canadians. Some of the important contrasts in Lady
Oracle are bad men (such as the exhibitionist) vs. good men
(the daffodil man), fantasy vs. reality, here vs. "the other
side," roles vs. real people. In addition to the preceding
dichotomies, Life Before Man involves a foreigner/WASP oppo-
sition, and Bodily Harm contrasts love vs. sex, good vs.

evil. The dichotomies found in Atwood's novels are so important that they are the focus of Sherrill Grace's study of Atwood's fiction, Violent Duality, and are mentioned in many of the essays in Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System, a collection co-edited by Grace and Lorraine Weir.

Atwood's novels and traditional fairy tales depict a world of binary oppositions, but they do not convey the same attitude towards this world. Fairy tales uphold and applaud the binary system, whereas Atwood's novels resist and ultimately reject the system. Understanding why these attitudes differ requires an analysis of the function of binary oppositions in fairy tales contrasted to their function in Atwood's novels.

There are many reasons why fairy tales present the world in terms of extreme contrasts. Folktale scholar Max Lüthi explains that the aesthetics of the tale require such a presentation. He treats the folktale as an art form, and as such the tale must be internally balanced. In Lüthi's view, contrasts help to establish some sort of balance against repetition of the same episodes, words, character types, and so on, in the fairy tale (Fairy Tale as Art Form 95). In addition, contrasts are one of several elements that lend the tale a concrete quality to balance its tendency to generalize people, making them types, and to generalize places, making them representations of anywhere:

> . . .the predilection for everything clearly
> formed (in colors as well as in shape), the
> tendency toward extremes and contrasts, toward
> metals and minerals, cities, castles, rooms,
> boxes, rings, and swords, and the tendency to
> make feelings and relationships congeal into
> objects, so to speak, and thus become outward-
> ly visible--all these things give the fairy
> tale definiteness, firmness, clarity. (Once
> Upon a Time 51-52)

Even the style of the fairy tale emphasizes contrasts; Lüthi

argues that comparisons appear much more frequently than met-

aphors in fairy tales because a comparison "separates, sets

up two poles" whereas "the metaphor creates a merger" (Fairy

Tale as Art Form 111).

In addition to aesthetic reasons, the fairy tale empha-

sizes contrasts to represent as much of the world as possi-

ble in a short piece of fiction. Lüthi and other folktale

scholars have been captivated by the tale's ability to cap-

sulize humans and the world they live in. Lüthi explains

how contrasts aid in the depiction of the world:

> If the fairy tale is to incorporate the elements
> of existence. . .it must greatly simplify them.
> One means of accomplishing this is through inten-
> sification toward the extremes: a poor man, an
> old woman, a wicked stepmother. (Once Upon a
> Time 73)

As this quotation shows, the use of contrasts means that

fairy tale characters have prescribed roles.

The use of extreme contrasts in the fairy tale has

still another purpose: it establishes clear criteria by

which moral judgments can be made. As Lüthi notes, "The

distinction between good and evil. . .is one of the essential features of the fairytale" (<u>Fairy Tale as Art Form</u> 162).
This distinction establishes moral values.   Bruno Bettelheim makes the same point in <u>The Uses of Enchantment</u>, his book on the didactic value of fairy tales for children:

> Presenting the polarities of character [good/
> evil, virtuous/vile, industrious/lazy] permits
> the child to comprehend easily the difference
> between the two, which he could not do as
> readily were the figures drawn more true to
> life, with all the complexities that charac-
> terize real people.   (9)

Bettelheim asserts that, after being exposed to such extremes, the child will choose to become like the hero or heroine, thus developing his or her good qualities.

The morality espoused in fairy tales was very important to the Grimm brothers' original audience. In <u>Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion</u>, Jack Zipes traces the influence of society on various fairy tales, including Grimms' tales. He points out that the Grimms revised the oral tales they collected to reflect bourgeois <u>Biedermeier</u> (equivalent to Victorian, in Anglo history) tastes. One goal of their editing was to eliminate sexual allusions (Zipes 50-51). Another goal was to reinforce bourgeois gender roles (Zipes 53). By altering the tales to suit their audience's moral views, the Grimms ensured that the tales would become very popular.

Their tales also became popular because they, like all fairy tales, appeal to the human need for order. In Grimms'

fairy tales, readers find an ordered world where everyone
has a specific role and gets his just rewards. This ordered
world has become even more appealing today as people become
frustrated and bewildered in our complex, chaotic world.
With its stable world, fixed values, and clear roles, the
traditional European fairy tale provides "'a reply to the
demons'" of insecurity and uncertainty that plague today's
generation (Lüthi, European Folktale 93). More than this,
however, the fairy tale advances the hope that its world
is the real world and that someday our world and the fairy
tale world will be one and the same (Lüthi, European Folk-
tale 91).

Unlike Lüthi, Carl Gustav Jung sees the fairy tale
world as a fantasy, not as a reality. He posits that the
human tendency to impose order on reality is itself artifi-
cial:

> Jung's belief in the ultimate unity of all
> existence led him to suppose that physical and
> mental, as well as spatial and temporal, were
> human categories imposed upon reality which did
> not accurately reflect it. Human beings, be-
> cause of the nature of thought and language,
> are bound to categorize things as opposites;
> that is, all human statements are antinomian.
> But these opposites may, in fact, be facets of
> the same reality. (Storr 25)

Jung's view that the human categorizing tendency imposes an
artificial reality on the world is evident in Atwood's nov-
els. The major contrast in her novels is between mind and
body. This dichotomy has been examined by many critics.[2]

The consensus is that in the mind-against-body struggle in Atwood's characters, the mind gets control:

> Often the imagery describes the body as a mechanism remotely controlled by the head; sometimes the neck is sealed over; always the intellectual part of the psyche is felt to be a fragment, dissociated from the whole.   (Onley 26)

The mind has the power to impose categories on reality to fulfill the human need for order. However, when the mind becomes overly dominant because it is working in opposition to the body rather than in tandem with it, the categorizing ability is carried to an extreme. This is the situation that Atwood's characters are in; Jung (and, I believe, Atwood) would say that this is the situation Western man is in because of his emphasis on intellect to the detriment of intuition and instinct.

The difference between the attitude of Atwood's novels and traditional fairy tales towards a binary world view thus becomes apparent: The fairy tale sees binary pairs as embodying actual reality; in contrast, Atwood's novels present binary pairs as artificial reality. Atwood's novels resist the binary system because it imposes artificial limitations on the individual's view of himself and the world, limitations that stifle his development. This point becomes clear through an examination of the effects of the dichotomized world shown in Atwood's novels.

In Atwood's novels, as in fairy tales, one effect of the binary world is the creation of roles for the characters.

While fairy tales depict the hero and heroine as living hap-
pily ever after in their roles, Atwood's characters live
unhappily due to the roles expected of them. Critic Gloria
Onley notes that Atwood's personae become schizophrenic as
they attempt to liberate themselves from "a repressive so-
cial reality structure" (31). Part of this structure is the
expectation that they should adhere to the typical princess
role, as discussed in the preceding chapter.

In addition, Atwood includes a figure in each novel who
has been detrimentally affected by the role she is expected
to play. This figure acts as a foil, enabling the heroine
to recognize the same crippling influence in her own life.
In The Edible Woman, this character is Clara. Before mar-
riage and motherhood, Clara was a promising graduate student.
Since these events, Clara has become a traditional non-work-
ing wife and mother, but these roles do not leave her much
room or time to do something for herself. Marian sees Clara's
problem as lack of organization, but Ainsley corrects her,
recognizing that Clara has become too passive in her role:
"'How can she stand it?' Ainsley said with more vehemence
than usual. 'She just lies there and that man does all the
work! She lets herself be treated like a thing!'" (37). It
is easy to be passive when a person's only goal is to live
according to a preconceived role, which in Clara's case is
that of wife and mother. Clara's example is relevant to

Marian as Marian is contemplating marriage to Peter and
starting a family.

The figure constrained by her role in Surfacing is Anna.
Near the end of the novel, the narrator gives an insightful
description of the trap Anna is in:

> Rump on a packsack, harem cushion, pink on
> the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes,
> as red as blood as black as ebony, a seamed and
> folded imitation of a magazine picture that is
> itself an imitation of a woman who is also an
> imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed
> angel in the same heaven where God is a circle,
> captive princess in someone's head. She is
> locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or
> cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing
> comes out. (194)

Because the narrator is already coming to terms with herself
by this point in the novel, her description of Anna is a hor-
rifying picture of someone trapped in a role. The word
choice emphasizes the artificiality and rigidity of Anna's
role: "imitation," "captive," "locked in." The images in
the last sentence reinforce the idea that Anna is not allowed
to deviate from her role or to change in any way. The nega-
tive connotation of the words and images taken together
clearly indicates that rigid roles are harmful.

In Lady Oracle, Life Before Man, and Bodily Harm, the
character trapped by a role is more closely related to the
heroine than is the case in Atwood's first two novels.
Joan's mother is the trapped figure in Lady Oracle. Not un-
til after her mother's death does Joan begin to see the

restrictive role her mother was confined in. Looking into

her mother's photograph album to see if she can learn more

about her mother's youth, Joan makes a startling discovery:

> I got out the photograph album to refresh my
> memory. Perhaps in the expressions of the faces
> there would be some clue. But in all the pictures
> of the white-flannelled man, the face had been cut
> out, neatly as with a razor blade. The faces of
> my father also were missing. There was only my
> mother, young and pretty, laughing gaily at the
> camera, clutching the arms of her headless men. I
> sat for an hour with the album open on the table
> before me, stunned by this evidence of her terrible
> anger. I could almost see her doing it, her long
> fingers working with precise fury, excising the
> past, which had turned into the present and be-
> trayed her, stranding her in this house, this plas-
> tic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit.
> (201)

Not only was Joan's mother trapped in "this house," which is

a metaphor for her role as housewife, she was trapped into

motherhood. The man in the white flannel was supposed to be

her Prince Charming, but due to an unplanned pregnancy, she

ended up with Joan's father. To make the best of her situa-

tion, Joan's mother attacked her wife-mother role with fer-

vor. She tried to make her home picture perfect, covering

the furniture with plastic to keep it looking new, keeping

mats on the carpets to prevent them from wearing out, never

leaving dirty dishes in the sink. Then what caused her to

deface her photo album? Despite living out her role perfect-

ly, Joan's mother did not end up with a prince for a husband

or a princess for a daughter, and she was bitterly disap-

pointed. In fact, she developed a drinking problem as a

result of this disappointment. The passage quoted above is
important because it shows the beginning of Joan's realiza-
tion that her mother was not an ogre, just a woman imprisoned
by an inflexible role and unrealistic expectations about
what life could offer her.

The embittered woman in Life Before Man is Elizabeth's
Aunt Muriel. Even though she has not lived in her aunt's
home for years, Elizabeth cannot keep from analyzing why
Aunt Muriel is so severe. She comes up with the following
reasons: Aunt Muriel's father would not allow her to go to
college, and Aunt Muriel had to embroider even though she
was not good at it because it was considered women's work.
Elizabeth sums up Aunt Muriel's predicament as having to as-
sume a role expected of a female when she was not particular-
ly suited for it: "Auntie Muriel had a strong personality
and a good mind and she was not pretty, and patriarchal so-
ciety punished her" (120). Unlike Joan in Lady Oracle, how-
ever, Elizabeth does not become sympathetic to her aunt upon
making this realization. Life Before Man is a more realistic
novel; consequently, the bitterness that Aunt Muriel harbors
has been spread to Elizabeth and her sister, Caroline, mak-
ing it difficult for Elizabeth to forgive her.

Bodily Harm's Rennie also has a very negative reaction
to the embittered woman, who in this case is her mother; she
vows never to become like her. Her mother takes care of

Rennie's grandmother, now that the grandmother is losing her

memory and sense of balance and touch. Her mother's life

revolves entirely around this role, which Rennie compares to

being a saint, so that she did not have time for her husband

(he got a divorce) or for Rennie, who left home as soon as

possible. Rennie reflects on this unhappy situation:

> All I could think of at that time was how to
> get away from Griswold. I didn't want to be
> trapped, like my mother. Although I admired her--
> everyone was always telling me how admirable she
> was, she was practically a saint--I didn't want to
> be like her in any way. I didn't want to have a
> family or be anyone's mother, ever. (57)

Rennie's mother is not the only trapped character in this

novel. As Lora talks about her mother, it becomes apparent

that her mother too is trapped in a role. Lora's mother,

unlike Rennie's, longs for some miracle to change her life.

As Lora describes her mother:

> . . .she wanted to believe in fate, she wanted to
> believe that some day the wheel would come around
> and it would be her turn, not for anything she'd
> done that would make her deserve it, but just be-
> cause it was her turn. She never said so, she
> used to say we should make the most of what we
> had and be thankful for our blessings, but under-
> neath it I think she hated those cellars and the
> smell of cat piss and maybe even Bob as much as
> I did. But she didn't know what else to do, she
> didn't know how to get out. (105)

Rennie's and Lora's mothers are women who have learned to

live within a role even when that role by its very nature

stifles their development and limits their options.

Fairy tale characters are consistent in their roles.

The villain does not suddenly become the hero; the stepmother

does not suddenly become a princess; or vice versa. Atwood's heroines expect their acquaintances to be as consistent in their roles as are fairy tale characters. Consequently, the characters in Atwood's novels are always unhappily surprised when other people do not stick to their roles. The Edible Woman's heroine is upset to think that her prince, Peter, might actually be stalking her, waiting to trap her. The narrator in Surfacing is baffled upon discovering that the destructive people she has cast as "Americans" are actually Canadians. Joan, in Lady Oracle, is confused when she thinks that the exhibitionist--a villain--might be the daffodil man--a rescuer, or that Arthur--a rescuer--might actually be a villain. In Life Before Man, Lesje is deeply disturbed when William, a seemingly nice and caring lover, attempts to rape her. His action causes her to lose something important, her trust: "She trusted him to be what he seemed to be, and she will never be able to do that with anyone again" (196). The other narrators of Life Before Man are similarly dis-turbed when someone deviates from his role. Elizabeth does not know how to act when she visits Auntie Muriel--whom she thinks of as "the Wicked Witch of the West" (139)--in the hospital. Elizabeth sees a dying Auntie Muriel weep, obvi-ously in need of consolation, which is not the usual Auntie Muriel role. Nate, also, is surprised when his seemingly stable and optimistic mother reveals that she took up causes

to avoid killing herself. Rennie in <u>Bodily Harm</u> is likewise

disturbed when people are not what they seem to be. The

thought that the elderly, bird-watching couple might actu-

ally be CIA agents baffles her.

Atwood has discussed the concept of roles in her fic-

tion with interviewers. She explained to Linda Sandler that

"popular art is material for serious art in the way that

dreams are. In <u>Power Politics</u> I was using myths such as

Bluebeard, Dracula, and horror comic material, to project

certain images of men and women, and to examine them" (10).

Atwood's term "popular art" obviously includes fairy tales

since she mentions Bluebeard as one of her examples. This

comment shows that Atwood consciously borrows roles from

fairy tales to make a point in her fiction. In an interview

conducted by J. R. Struthers, Atwood explained what this

point is. Referring to <u>Lady Oracle</u>, Atwood said that the

novel examines

> the perils of gothic thinking. And one of the
> perils of gothic thinking is that gothic thinking
> means that you have a scenario in your head which
> involves certain roles--the dark, experienced man,
> who is possibly evil and possibly good, the res-
> cuer, the mad wife, and so on--and that as you go
> to real life you tend to cast real people in these
> roles as Joan does. Then when you find out that
> real people don't fit these two-dimensional roles,
> you can either discard the roles and try to deal
> with the real person or discard the real person.
> (23-24)

Atwood's term "gothic thinking" is equivalent to the frame-

work found in fairy tales. Although life would be more

predictable if people fit preconceived roles, this expectation is not realistic. Moreover, a life lived according to a role is not necessarily happy in Atwood's fiction. Acquiescence in a role narrows a person's horizons and negates the possibility for personal growth. Atwood's novels suggest that the mind's ability to categorize--one aspect of which is to project roles--is too dominant in our society.

Another consequence of the mind's power to categorize is an overreliance on principles of logic to analyze complex situations. In fairy tales, logical principles can hold true because the world is simplistic and absolute. But the world in Atwood's novels is complex, and its issues are evaded rather than answered when treated by either/or statements and syllogistic logic. Examples from the novels show the shortcomings of logic and, by extension, language since it is the medium which communicates these rigid principles from one mind to another.

Either/or thinking presents only two alternatives, thereby preventing wholeness or the postulation of a third option. This type of thinking is mentioned explicitly in some of Atwood's novels. Ainsley rebukes Marian in The Edible Woman for "'thinking in terms of either/or'" (40). For the narrator of Surfacing, whom Sherrill Grace describes as having "taken the logical to its extreme. . .and attempted to live through her mind alone" (Violent Duality 103), either/or

sentence structures are a habit. For example, she starts to feel uneasy while traveling to the lake to look for her father and says, "either the three of them [Anna, David, Joe] are in the wrong place or I am" (10). This false dilemma evades the real issues, which are the narrator's concern about her father's disappearance and her unwillingness to face the past. Then later, when they are on the island, the narrator oversimplifies the situation concerning her missing father: "'there's only two places he can be, on the island or in the lake'" (53). Her attempt to simplify the situation by taking a logical approach eventually results in a psychological crisis. In the end she rejects the supremacy of logic. Rennie of Bodily Harm is another character who wants to simplify a serious problem through either/or thinking:

> Either I'm living or I'm dying, she said to Daniel. Please don't feel you can't tell me. Which is it?
>
> Which does it feel like? said Daniel. He patted her hand. You're not dead yet. You're a lot more alive than many people.
>
> This isn't good enough for Rennie. She wants something definite, the real truth, one way or the other. (59)

Unfortunately for Rennie, the "real truth" cannot be contained in binary options, either/or. One of the paths of development in the novel traces Rennie's gradual awareness that either/or does not describe the real world. In the end,

she realizes that "there's no longer a <u>here</u> and a <u>there</u>"
(256); on one level, "here" and "there" refer to Toronto and
St. Antoine, but on a deeper level, this statement signifies
the end of Rennie's binary pattern of thinking.

Another logical device that leads Atwood's characters
to false conclusions is the syllogism. It is used for humor-
ous effect in <u>Lady Oracle</u>. For example, Joan's quest to
make Arthur happy leads her through the following argument:

> The love of a good woman was supposed to preserve
> a man from this kind of thing, I knew that. But
> at these times I wasn't able to make him happy,
> no matter how badly I cooked. Therefore I was
> not a good woman. (237)

Not only are Joan's premises false, her plan to cook badly
so that Arthur will not feel inferior is hilarious. The
humor of this example of invalid reasoning subtly shows the
limitations of logic. Unlike those in <u>Lady Oracle</u>, the syl-
logisms in <u>Life Before Man</u> are serious attempts to grapple
with a problem. For example, Elizabeth thinks in syllogisms
when trying to decide exactly how her aunt feels about her:
"Auntie Muriel's attitude towards Elizabeth was equivocal.
Elizabeth's mother was no good, therefore Elizabeth herself
was probably no good. But Elizabeth was Auntie Muriel's
niece, so there must be something to her" (137). Neither of
these syllogisms is true because the goodness of a person
cannot be based simply on heritage or upbringing. The syl-
logisms represent Elizabeth's unsuccessful attempt to deal
with the situation. But Elizabeth is not the only character

in this novel to want syllogisms to lead to truth. Lesje
has this expectation too: "She loves Nate; therefore she's
left William and gone to live with Nate. Why then has Nate
not yet come to live with her?" (208). Lesje is more like
a fairy tale character in this novel than Elizabeth or Nate.
She thinks that if a simple syllogism can capture her feel-
ings, then it ought to work for Nate's. But real people are
seldom so simple in their motivations.

Language is the medium for communicating logical princi-
ples. It is, therefore, a system that can establish false
dichotomies, false conclusions. Consequently, Atwood's nar-
rators often develop a distrust of language, best shown in
the novel Surfacing. The mind/body dichotomy is personified
in the novel as the narrator's father and mother. Her father
represents pure logic, rationality, language; her mother rep-
resents instinct, intuition, feeling. The narrator draws an
important connection between the mind/body dichotomy and
language:

> 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. The language
> is wrong, it shouldn't have different words for
> them. (91)

This passage begins part two of the novel, pointing out one
of its most important themes: language, as an extension of
the mind's logic, is too limited to accurately express real-
ity. Body and mind are opposing terms in language, but in

reality they are parts of one personality. The limitations
of language are felt again by the narrator when Joe asks if
she loves him: "the Eskimos had fifty-two names for snow
because it was important to them, there ought to be as many
for love" (127). Joe, however, thinks a "yes or no" answer
will tell the truth, so the narrator's reaction frustrates
him. As the novel unfolds, the narrator becomes increasing-
ly critical of language: "Language divides us into frag-
ments, I wanted to be whole" (172). Gloria Onley suggests a
greater significance to the characters' distrust of language
in the novel: "The difficulty in human relations, metaphored
in Surfacing as exile from the biosphere, is metaphysically
related to the exploitive use of language to impose psycho-
logical power structures" (32). Onley goes on to cite
George Steiner's idea that grammars themselves can "'conde-
scend or enslave'" (33), a conclusion that the narrator of
Surfacing eventually reaches. Near the end of the novel,
she turns to "the other language" (Surfacing 185), a kind of
dynamic, ideographic language:

> In one of the languages there are no nouns, only
> verbs held for a longer moment.
>
> The animals have no need for speech, why
> talk when you are a word
>
> I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning
>
>
> I break out again into the bright sun and crum-
> ple, head against the ground

>   I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing
> in which the trees and animals move and grow, I
> am a place   (212-13)

In this "other language," the categorization of nouns versus
verbs breaks down; both are seen as verbs, differing only in
duration. This language also allows subject and object--
comprising the most common grammatical dichotomy--to be
equivalent; the narrator is leaning against a tree and exist-
ing as the tree itself. In fact, in this other language,
the narrator can be animal, tree, and place without coming
up against the self/other dichotomy apparent in our language.
Another unusual grammatical feature of the other language is
the lack of periods. As the periods disappear, so do the
boundaries that language and thought can impose.

One of these boundaries divides good from evil. In
fairy tales, good and evil are clearly recognizable because
they are personified. In the end, good always triumphs
while the wicked stepmother is punished, the malicious wiz-
ard burned, the false bride stuck in a nail-studded barrel.
The clear distinction between good and evil along with the
Grimms' editing makes the fairy tale very moralistic (although
not so didactic as Charles Perrault's tales, each of which
has a moralité at its conclusion). Like the fairy tales,
Atwood's novels connect a binary world view with moral cate-
gories, but for a different purpose. Rather than affirming
moralistic distinctions as the fairy tales do, her novels
criticize them because they are often arbitrary, being the

product of the mind's power to artificially categorize real-

ity. For example, in Surfacing the narrator recalls that

her brother designated leeches with red dots as "good" and

leeches with gray and yellow mottling as "bad." The lesson

she learns from this experience is that "There had to be a

good kind and a bad kind of everything" (44). Later she

discovers that even words can be classified as good ("clean")

or bad ("dirty"), and this valuation system puzzles her,

suggesting that moral categories are not inherent in nature,

but are part of culture.

Atwood's novels reject the bourgeois moral code that

fairy tales affirm. This rejection is made evident through

the inclusion of an unsympathetic peripheral character who

represents this code in the novels.[3] Marian's landlady in

The Edible Woman is such a figure, as are Arthur and his

mother in Lady Oracle, Auntie Muriel and William's family in

Life Before Man, and Rennie's mother and grandmother (a mi-

crocosm of Griswold) in Bodily Harm. If Atwood's heroines

were to follow the example of these characters, they would

become narrow-minded and their development thwarted.

Nevertheless, Atwood's characters long for the simplic-

ity of the fairy tale world with its established roles, con-

sistent logic, and traditional moral code. No one expresses

this desire more poignantly than Joan in Lady Oracle:

> I longed for the simplicity of that world,
> where happiness was possible and wounds were only
> ritual ones. Why had I been closed out from that

impossible white paradise where love was as final
as death, and banished to this other place where
everything changed and shifted?   (316)

Time and time again Atwood's heroines are confronted with

evidence that the fairy tale world is not their world. And

ultimately Atwood's heroines discover that the binary system

of the fairy tale world is too rigid and limiting.

Using the binary system of the fairy tale, Atwood's nov-

els point to a new world view which is not limited to two

alternatives. Atwood describes this view in an interview

with Graeme Gibson, using the killer/victim dichotomy as an

example:

> If the only two kinds of people are killers and
> victims, then although it may be morally prefer-
> able to be a victim, it is obviously preferable
> from the point of view of survival to be a kil-
> ler. However either alternative seems pretty
> hopeless; you know, you can define yourself as
> innocent and get killed, or you can define your-
> self as a killer and kill others. I think there
> has to be a third thing. . .the ideal would be
> somebody who would neither be a killer or a vic-
> tim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with
> the world, which is a productive or creative
> harmony, rather than a destructive relationship
> towards the world.   (27)

Atwood's concept of a "third thing" is also discussed in

Survival. Essentially the third thing is equivalent to "Po-

sition Four," in which man

> does not define himself as "good" or "weak" as
> against a hostile Nature, or as "bad" or "aggres-
> sive" as against a passive, powerless Nature.
> . . .he is free to move within space rather than
> in a self-created tank against it. (Survival 63)

In none of Atwood's novels is this third thing depicted

because the real world is less than ideal. At least, how-
ever, the characters achieve a moment of vision, recognizing
that reality is not made up of binary oppositions, and after
this moment of recognition, they can begin to search for
that third thing. As Sherrill Grace explains, the search is
most important:

> Atwood identifies human failure as acquiescence in
> those Western dichotomies which postulate the in-
> escapable, static division of the world into hostile
> opposites: culture/nature, male/female, straight
> line/curved space, head/body, reason/instinct,
> victor/victim. ("Articulating the 'Space Between'"
> 5)

The danger of acquiescence is apparent in the novels. Di-
chotomies separate us from "our environments, our bodies,
other people, and finally even ourselves" (Grace, Violent
Duality 105).

Liberation from the binary system, however, is not eas-
ily accomplished, as Gloria Onley observes:

> Atwood's poems and stories are not resigned and
> "graceful" sublimations of what is usually re-
> ferred to as the human condition. Rather they
> are frighteningly precise image structures, icon-
> oclastic keys to getting mentally outside of
> Bluebeard's Castle. (41)

An important theme in Atwood's fiction, the struggle to move
beyond binary oppositions is clarified as the confines of
the fairy tale world are delineated.

CHAPTER IV

TRANSFORMATION

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.
The optic heart must venture: a jail-break
And re-creation.
        --Margaret Avison, "Snow"

Margaret Atwood's heroines experience a transformation
in the way they look at the world. As discussed in the pre-
vious chapter, the heroines begin to move beyond a binary
conceptualization of reality. This transformation of vision
is accompanied by self-transformation. Although Atwood's
novels and fairy tales do not convey the same attitude
towards the binary world, both focus on self-transformation
as the most important event in any story.

In the fairy tale, transformation is usually inflicted
upon some innocent person initially by an evil character.
One example is the frog prince, a prince who has been be-
witched and thus appears to be a frog. His eventual trans-
formation back to human form, the dénouement of the story,
signifies the breaking of the spell. The literal transfor-
mation, the change of his physical shape, caused by the dis-
enchantment also indicates the psychological import that
underlies such a change: through transformation a person
becomes whole.[1]   In the case of the frog prince, his

appearance after the spell is broken, human form, is made consistent with his psychological identity as a human being, thus making him whole rather than divided within himself.

Sometimes in fairy tales transformation fails because the outward shape of the person belies her inner character. For example, each of Cinderella's sisters in Grimms' version cuts off part of a foot so that the golden slipper will fit, and each rides off with the prince--but not for long because blood seeps out of the shoe indicating her false transformation into a girl fit to marry a prince. In all tales where an ugly, vile character takes the place of a beautiful princess via a false transformation, the deceit eventually is discovered; Brüderchen und Schwesterchen (No. 11), Die drei Männlein im Walde (No. 13), Die Gänsemagd (No. 89), Jungfrau Maleen (No. 198) are just some of the tales which incorporate this motif. Even the devil himself cannot totally transform his appearance in fairy tales; in Der Bärenhäuter (No. 101), Grimms' version of "Beauty and the Beast," the devil appears as a stately man wearing a green jacket; he looks innocuous except for one foot, a hoof, indicating his true nature.

Because appearance and reality always coincide at the end of a fairy tale, a transformation in appearance brings about a transformation in circumstances or status. Cinderella washes off the soot and then becomes a princess; conversely, a bride is discovered to be ugly and then is punished

(sometimes exiled, sometimes killed) for being deceitful.

The literal meaning of these transformations, however, is

not as important as their symbolic meaning, explains scholar

Max Lüthi:

> The fairy tale often depicts how a penniless
> wretch becomes wealthy, a maid becomes queen,
> a disheveled man is changed into a youth with
> golden hair, or a toad, bear, ape, or dog is
> transformed into a beautiful maiden or handsome
> youth. Here, we feel at once the capacity for
> change of man in general. The focal point is
> not the rise of the servant to his position of
> master, not the esteem and recognition accorded
> the former outcast child; these are images for
> something more fundamental: man's deliverance
> from an unauthentic existence and his commence-
> ment of a true one. (Once Upon a Time 138)

For fairy tale characters, a true existence occurs when

inner nature and outward appearance correspond.

Tension between their inner and outer selves is appar-

ent in Atwood's heroines, making transformation an important

part of their development and of the novels themselves. As

in the fairy tales, not all of these transformations are

successful. Atwood's heroines sometimes mistakenly believe

that an outward change of appearance or status will cause an

inner transformation. For instance, Marian's slinky, red

dress and makeup in The Edible Woman constitute a false trans-

formation. Marian believes this costume transforms her iden-

tity, making her a model fiancee for Peter; however, Duncan's

reaction to her appearance reveals this misconception: "'You

didn't tell me it was a masquerade,' he said at last. "Who

the hell are you supposed to be?'" (245). The narrator of

Surfacing also undergoes a false transformation: she falsifies the past, making up a husband and child, thinking that this change in status exempts her from further change. But this superficial transformation--false in two respects--fortunately fails. Physical transformation is also to no avail in Life Before Man. Nate thinks shaving off his beard will change him into someone else, but it does not.[2] Elizabeth, the most savvy character in the novel, knows that such transformations do not change the inner person, but also recognizes that most people think they do. She, therefore, plans to go on a diet, get a new hairstyle, and so on, after the divorce to give others the impression that she is a whole new person. Rennie in Bodily Harm also makes a game out of physical appearance; one of her pastimes is observing strangers, deducing their occupations based on appearance, and then redoing them. Rennie tries to explain this game to Daniel: "People love being redone. I mean, you don't think you're finished, do you? Don't you want to change and grow? Don't you think there's more? Don't you want me to redo you?" (128). Implied in Rennie's queries is the assumption that a transformation in appearance can cause internal changes, but this is simply not true in Atwood's novels.

The master of superficial transformations, of all of Atwood's characters, is Joan in Lady Oracle. Since the time she enrolled in Miss Flegg's dance school as a child, Joan has believed in miraculous changes. For instance, she

thought that adding wings to her dance costume would make her chubby, gauze-covered body look like a butterfly. Joan recollects, "I was hoping for magic transformations, even then" (47). The wings, however, did not transform her appearance; consequently, Miss Flegg decided Joan should become a mothball--hardly a magical transformation--and Joan later thinks to herself, "So what if you turn into a butterfly? Butterflies die too" (125). Nevertheless, the adult Joan does not give up her belief in magical transformations. Attempting to transform her inner self, she changes her name, her physical appearance, and her past. When she initially transforms herself by losing weight, Joan thinks,

> I was face to face with the rest of my life. I
> was now a different person, and it was like being
> born fully grown at the age of nineteen: I was
> the right shape, but I had the wrong past. I'd
> have to get rid of it entirely and construct a
> different one for myself, a more agreeable one.
> (157)

Joan sets out to transform the past through lies, but lying changes only appearance, not reality. Joan gradually realizes that a change in appearance does not create a new person:

> When I looked at myself in the mirror, I didn't
> see what Arthur saw. The outline of my former
> body still surrounded me, like a mist, like a
> phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying
> Elephant superimposed on my own. I wanted to
> forget the past, but it refused to forget me.
> (239)

Even a change in status fails to make Joan feel like a new person. Promoting her book of poetry Lady Oracle, Joan is

despondent despite the glamorous spotlight she finds herself in; "What was the use of being Princess-for-a-day if you still felt like a toad?" (266), Joan asks herself. The failure of a superficial transformation to change her identity becomes most apparent to Joan when Mr. Vitroni informs her that the people of Terremoto recognize her despite her disguise: cutting her hair, dyeing it black, wearing a scarf and sunglasses, adopting another name. All that effort and Joan still cannot evade the question her mother repeatedly asked her while she was growing up: "'Who do you think you are?'" (250). Joan does not know, hence her penchant for transformations. The outer transformations of Atwood's heroines are failures, and no wonder considering that when a fairy tale character undergoes an outer change at the end of of the story--say from frog to prince--his appearance does not cause a change in his nature but is instead a reflection of his true identity.

In the fairy tale, marriage (or the promise of marriage) brings about a change in the heroine's status, oftentimes elevating her from a low position to a high one. Her new status, usually as princess, reflects the virtue that has always been part of her inner character. Atwood's heroines look to marriage as a kind of transformation too, but for them it is a failure. Most of the marriages, engagements, and live-in arrangements in Atwood's novels do not last

because the heroines mistakenly think marriage, or an intimate relationship, is a form of self-transformation.

Atwood has called The Edible Woman an "anti-comedy" because of its treatment of marriage:

> . . .in your standard 18th-century comedy you have a young couple who is faced with difficulty in the form of somebody who embodies the restrictive forces of society and they trick or overcome this difficulty and end up getting married. The same thing happens in THE EDIBLE WOMAN except the wrong person gets married. And the person who embodies the restrictive forces of society is in fact the person Marian gets engaged to. In a standard comedy, he would be the defiant hero. As it is, he and the restrictive society are blended into one, and the comedy solution would be a tragic solution for Marian. (Gibson 21)

Marriage, then, can restrict individual development—especially when the heroine thinks that becoming part of a couple is the transformation needed to give her a sense of identity. Marian thinks along these lines when she starts to envy Clara because

> Whatever was going to happen to Clara had already happened: she had turned into what she was going to be. It wasn't that she wanted to change places with Clara; she only wanted to know what she was becoming, what direction she was taking, so she could be prepared. (211)

The preparations going on at the time are for Marian's and Peter's wedding. Marian thinks of the marriage as an inevitable transformation; not until later in the novel does she realize that she can control and direct her self-development. Surfacing's narrator expresses much the same idea:

> I thought it would happen without my doing any-
> thing about it, I'd turn into part of a couple,
> two people linked together and balancing each
> other, like the wooden man and woman in the
> barometer house at Paul's. (46)

But two people cannot balance each other unless they are

whole individuals. The narrator is, of course, deluding her-

self about her marriage--it has not actually taken place--but

more important, she mistakenly looks to marriage as a kind

of self-transformation. This idea gets a twist in Lady

Oracle. Joan knows that marriage is supposed to be the ulti-

mate change in her life, but she regards herself as a failure

at it. "For years I wanted to turn into what Arthur thought

I was, or what he thought I should be" (235), Joan confesses

and details her shortcomings. But the time reference "For

years" indicates something in the past; the implication is

that Joan has ceased to believe marriage will transform her

character, and in this respect she is one step ahead of the

heroines of the preceding novels.

The danger of thinking a romantic relationship can trans-

form the individual himself is shown in Life Before Man with

the traditional roles reversed: Elizabeth is the person

with the power, Chris the person who wanted to be transformed.

Elizabeth recalls his attraction to her:

> She had what he wanted, power over a certain part
> of the world. . . .She had that power and she'd
> let him see it and touch it. She let him see he
> was deficient and she promised, what? A trans-
> formation, a touch on the shoulder, knighthood.
> Then she'd stepped back, showing him that he was

after all only a vacation, a beautiful picture on
a brochure, a man in a loincloth whacking the head
off some nondescript coconut. A dime a dozen.
Leaving him naked. (161)

Chris has committed suicide before the novel begins, shooting
a bullet into his head, the part of his body that deluded him
into thinking his affair with Elizabeth could change his
character.

The preceding examples present a very bleak outlook for
marriage, or any other kind of romantic commitment, in At-
wood's novels, but to conclude that the novels forecast no
hope for male-female relationships would be a misinterpre-
tation. Atwood distinguishes between the relationship itself
and her characters' expectations of it. Her heroines think
that marriage (or getting engaged or living together) will
transform them, but as the fairy tale shows, marriage is a
reflection--not a cause--of inner character. In addition,
there is an important distinction between these two kinds of
heroines. Unlike the fairy tale heroine, who is fully mature
when the tale begins, Atwood's heroines have yet to become
psychologically mature. To this date, Atwood's novels have
not discussed the potential for male-female commitment (mar-
riage or otherwise) because the novels have been devoted
entirely to the heroine's maturation.

What, then, is true transformation for the Atwood hero-
ine? Analyzing Surfacing in an interview, Atwood said that
the heroine's quest is to be "a whole human being" (Gibson

26). In fact, all of Atwood's heroines have this quest in common. To become whole requires not just a change in appearance or status, but a self-transformation. In effect, the heroines must find a way out of what Atwood calls the "Rapunzel Syndrome." This syndrome has four elements:

> Rapunzel, the main character; the wicked witch who has imprisoned her, usually her mother or her husband, sometimes her father or grandfather; the tower she's imprisoned in--the attitudes of society, symbolized usually by her house and children which society says she must not abandon; and the Rescuer, a handsome prince of little substantiality who provides momentary escape. (Survival 209)

In Canadian fiction, however, there is an interesting twist to the syndrome, according to Atwood: "Rapunzel and the tower are the same. These heroines have internalized the values of their culture to such an extent that they have become their own prisons" (Survival 209). If Rapunzel and the tower are the same in Atwood's fiction, then Rapunzel--not the Rescuer--holds the key to her liberation. Transformation of vision, as discussed in the previous chapter, is one step towards liberation, but Atwood's heroine must also free herself from her identity as a passive princess. Rapunzels all, these heroines must stop waiting for the prince in the external world and start looking inside to discover the prince within. By taking action, the attribute associated with the prince or hero of the traditional fairy tale, Atwood's heroines transform themselves.

The development of Atwood's heroines, in fact, follows the pattern of the traditional fairy tale hero. As Max Lüthi explains in his books The Fairy Tale as Art Form and Portrait of Man and Once Upon a Time,[3] the fairy tale hero goes through three stages. First he is, or becomes, isolated from family and society. He may be an orphan, an only child, or a youngest child to show this isolation in a concrete way. Oftentimes he leaves home and wanders in isolation. Lüthi adds that the fairy tale heroine usually leaves home too, but she does so indirectly: "Whoever succeeds in marrying a prince automatically enters a new world" (Fairy Tale as Art Form 139). Atwood's narrators come close to following the pattern of the fairy tale heroine, but eventually they follow in the hero's footsteps. A glance at Atwood's narrators shows that they fit the hero mold in terms of birth: Marian never mentions any siblings in The Edible Woman; the narrator of Surfacing is a youngest child; Joan in Lady Oracle is an only child, as are Lesje in Life Before Man and Rennie in Bodily Harm.

Paradoxically, because the fairy tale hero is isolated, he can "establish contact with essential things" (Lüthi, Once Upon a Time 142). In this second stage, the hero forms fruitful relationships with plants, animals, the sun, the moon, inanimate objects, as well as strangers because of his isolation. Usually the hero is in need of help to complete a seemingly impossible task, and these newly found friends

come to his assistance. The helper is often a magical ani-
mal or a magical object, but it may also be a human being or
an otherworldly being. The magical helper or object can be
negative as well as positive, depending on whether the magic
is used to cast a spell or to break a spell. Both negative
and positive props are also apparent in Atwood's novels.
Tracing some images common to Atwood's fiction and poetry,
Russell Brown makes a generalization about totems that could
apply to magical objects in fairy tales as well: "Atwood
regularly shows us that there are bad totems as well as good,
objects of dangerous power as well as benign" (23). This
statement resembles Lüthi's discussion of magical objects in
The Fairy Tale as Art Form: "They can offer us protection
and support. We can make use of them, but we can also fall
under their influence: They can enslave or threaten us"
(147). Learning to wield power in a positive way is an im-
portant step for both fairy tale heroes and Atwood's hero-
ines.

The third stage is to act. The fairy tale hero is a
doer, not a philosopher. His goal is to deliver, rescue, or
disenchant the young maiden (or sometimes the helping figure).
The disenchantment is often portrayed as a transformation.
For example, in Grimms' tale Jorinde und Joringel (No. 69),
the hero uses a blood-red flower with a pearl center (a mag-
ical object) to disenchant the maiden, his fiancee, trans-
forming her from a nightengale to her human form. The flower

also disenchants the witch who had cast a spell on the girl,
making it impossible for her to practice witchcraft ever
again. Der goldene Vogel (No. 57) is an example of a tale
with a helping animal, a fox; at the end of the tale, the
hero disenchants the fox by shooting it and cutting off its
head and paws, whereupon the fox is transformed into a prince,
who turns out to be the brother of the hero's bride. The
helping figure can also be an otherworldly being; for exam-
ple, after Aschenputtel (Cinderella) weeps on her mother's
grave, the tree by it provides fine clothes for her to wear
to the prince's dance. In this case, the helping figure
aids the maiden directly, but it is the prince who ultimate-
ly delivers her from her low status, outwardly transforming
her into a princess by marrying her. Like the fairy tale
hero, the task of Atwood's heroine is to rescue or disenchant
the young maiden, who of course is herself. The way out of
Rapunzel's tower, then, is to take action, for action trans-
forms the passive princess into a hero.

The three-stage progression of the fairy tale hero--
isolation, contact with magical objects or beings, action--
is evident in all of Atwood's novels. Tracing this progres-
sion in each novel makes clear what true transformation is
for Atwood's heroines.

Marian becomes engaged to Peter in part one of The Edi-
ble Woman, the typical solution for a princess, but after
this point her isolation becomes increasingly evident.

Ainsley's pregnancy threatens their apartment-sharing arrange-
ment; Marian feels so distant from her friend Clara that she
finds it difficult to make even small talk with her; she re-
alizes that she will no longer be able to work after she is
married, eliminating the three "office virgins" as compan-
ions. Marian's isolation from friends and family is made
most apparent by the fact that no one notices her inability
to eat normally. Not being able to eat also represents Mari-
an's isolation from herself; her body and mind are working
against each other.

In her isolation, Marian enters into a relationship with
Duncan. Whether he functions as a negative or positive help-
er is not clear, but something about him makes Marian realize
that she does not want to marry Peter. Objects such as her
engagement ring and Peter's camera function as negative
props, pointing out the necessity for transformation by show-
ing how barren, even dangerous, life is without it. Marian's
thoughts about her engagement ring show that it has magical
powers for her: "She slid her engagement ring back onto her
finger, seeing the hard circle for a moment as a protective
talisman that would help keep her together. But the panic
was still with her. . ." (224-25). The ring's magic for-
tunately fails; the ring does not have the power to prevent
Marian from taking action to transform herself. Later in
the novel, Peter's camera makes Marian aware of the danger
of marrying him. Comparing the camera to a gun, a lethal

weapon, Marian thinks: "Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change" (252). This fate is analogous to death in her mind.

Marian's important action is to test Peter to see if he really means to harm her, so she decides to bake a cake. In a linguistic study comparing the two scenes in which Marian goes grocery shopping, Jayne Patterson demonstrates that even the style used to relate the later shopping trip indicates Marian's transformation: among other changes, verbs showing active participation increase. Patterson's conclusion is that Marian "converts from passive speculation about, to active reconstruction of, her personality" (157). Baking the cake in the shape of herself is especially important because it represents "the vulnerable and inferior person society would like her to be" (128), according to critic T. D. MacLulich. Eating the cake shows that Marian rejects this image, at least for the moment being, and is ready to take control of her life.[4] The act of eating also indicates that Marian's mind and body are no longer at odds with each other; she has become a whole person. Once she has transformed herself, Marian can even clean up her moldy, messy apartment, symbolizing her readiness to get a new start on life.

While The Edible Woman maintains a comic tone in its treatment of the heroine's transformation, the tone of

Surfacing is gravely serious. The narrator has not been home in nine years; her mother is dead; her father is missing; she has known her best friend, Anna, for only two months. Her isolation from herself has created a psychological disorder; her body and mind are so divided that she is numb to her feelings and physical sensation. As she describes it, "I didn't feel awful; I realized I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time. . . .At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head" (126). Her isolation is accentuated when she dives into the lake in search of Indian rock paintings and when she refuses to leave the island with the others. Catherine McLay is one of several critics who note that the narrator's isolation is responsible for the failure of lasting friendships and love relationships; however, if we look at the narrator's isolation in terms of the fairy tale hero's development, we realize that this isolation is necessary so that she can form essential, rather than superficial relationships.

In her isolation, the narrator receives positive magical gifts from both her father and mother. Sherrill Grace analyzes the significance of each bit of magic in Violent Duality:

> Her father's gift is the truth (he was always
> ruthless about the truth) of her abortion dis-
> covered when she sees his body; paradoxically
> his death also reveals the failure of logic--
> one cannot photograph the gods. Her mother's
> gift is organic and contextual, a picture of

a baby in its mother's womb. The narrator, of
course, cannot be complete herself until she
has rediscovered both parents and re-established
them in the context of her life. (103)

Discovering a gift from each parent is not the same as taking

action, however; her vision has been transformed, but she

needs to know what to do with her new knowledge. "How to

act" (186) becomes the most important concern for the narra-

tor in part three of the novel, as she moves toward self-

transformation.

Failure to change or evolve is equated with death in

Surfacing as it is in The Edible Woman. The narrator regrets

allowing her mother to be buried traditionally because "The

reason they invented coffins, [was] to lock the dead in, pre-

serve them, they put makeup on them; they didn't want them

spreading or changing into anything else" (176). Not chang-

ing is unnatural; only in death is stasis preserved. In con-

trast, metamorphosis is abundant in natural forms. Metamor-

phosis can bring life from apparent death, as the following

passage shows:

Further in, the trees they didn't cut before the
flood are marooned, broken and gray-white, tipped
on their sides, their giant contorted roots bleached
and skinless; on the sodden trunks are colonies of
plants, feeding on disintegration, laurel, sundew
the insect-eater, its toenail-sized leaves sticky
with red hairs. Out of the leaf nests the flowers
rise, pure white, flesh of gnats and midges, petals
now, metamorphosis. (197)

This organic image symbolizes that transformation is possible

for the narrator, if only she will act.

The first act the narrator takes responsibility for is (pro)creative; she draws Joe out into nature and directs him to impregnate her. Her second action is to destroy the false props that would have kept her from transforming: the wedding ring, her pictures of princesses, the copy of Quebec Folk Tales--the narrator makes some mark on all the artifacts of her former life to break the spell these objects have on her. Most important, the narrator realizes that power is not necessarily evil. Through her actions, the narrator transforms herself from being a passive victim, to exercising power in a positive, creative way. Her transformation gives the narrator hope that her baby will be "the first true human" (223) and the hope that she and Joe can create a relationship that is not a kind of captivity. Such are the possibilities that transformation creates.

Transformations abound in Lady Oracle, but they are mostly superficial until Joan starts to take responsibility for her actions, thus becoming a kind of hero. Her resemblance to the fairy tale hero in terms of isolation is fairly obvious: her mother is dead; her father has remarried; she has not told anyone the truth about her childhood or about being fat; she is estranged from her husband, exiling herself in Terremoto, Italy, where she has neither language, nationality, or custom in common with the inhabitants. Joan is aware of her isolation; at times she pictures everyone she has known on "the other side," a place that she can never

get to. In addition to her isolation from people, Joan also isolates herself from reality for long periods of time by telling lies, writing Costume Gothics, or daydreaming.

To return to reality, one spell that Joan must break is the "Miss Flegg syndrome." In Violent Duality, Sherrill Grace uses a fairy tale analogy to explain Miss Flegg's influence on Joan: "Miss Flegg is the wicked witch who transforms little Joan into a mothball" (119). Joan already had thought of herself as an ugly duckling, however; more important is the lesson Joan learns from Miss Flegg: "if you're going to be made to look ridiculous and there's no way out of it, you may as well pretend you meant to" (49). This syndrome affects Joan in at least two ways: she learns to believe mistakenly that some situations have no alternatives, reinforcing passive acceptance; she also unfortunately learns that pretending is as good as, or better than, reality. But as she contemplates the mess her life is in from her exile in Terremoto, Joan begins to realize that escape or passivity is not the answer; "SOS. . . .Do something" (344) is the message she writes to herself.

In addition to breaking the spell Miss Flegg has cast on her, Joan must recognize and reject Gothic novels as magical objects. They keep her wishing for escape and waiting for a rescuer; they are negative props. But while she is isolated in Terremoto, the Gothic novel Joan is working on starts to deviate from the rules. The transformation of

the fiction jolts Joan into action. In the manuscript, Red-
mond begins a series of transformations:

> His face grew a white gauze mask, then a pair
> of mauve-tinted spectacles, then a red beard
> and moustache, which faded, giving place to
> burning eyes and icicle teeth. Then his cloak
> vanished and he stood looking at her sadly; he
> was wearing a turtle-neck sweater. (377)

In succession, Redmond becomes Joan's father; Paul, the
count; Chuck Brewster, the Royal Porcupine; the hero of Joan's
volume of poetry, Lady Oracle; and Arthur, her husband. These
are all men that Joan expected to act as rescuers, hoping they
would break the evil spell cast on her. But the Redmond fig-
ure undergoes one final transformation in the manuscript,
causing Joan to leave the novel unfinished and to give up
Costume Gothics altogether: "The flesh fell away from his
face, revealing the skull behind it" (377). The manuscript
breaks off as Joan realizes that relying on someone else to
rescue her is dangerous, not only because the rescuer might
turn out to be a villain, but also because waiting to be res-
cued is deadly to her self-development.

Arnold and Cathy Davidson interpret the movement of
Joan's Costume Gothic beyond the rules of the genre as an in-
cation that

> Joan Foster has begun to use her own vision to
> shape her work; the fiction is no longer an escape;
> the artist is no longer a victim. She is seeing
> different possibilities, new modes of action. For
> the first time she is, in a small way, something
> of a lady oracle. ("Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle"
> 175)

In the very next scene of the novel, Joan is able to prove,
more or less, that she can be her own rescuer: she hits a
man over the head with a Cinzano bottle. The man turns out
to be a journalist--not really a villain--but Joan's action
completes her transformation. She resolves not to try to
escape, and she tells him the truth about her life. These
may seem like minor changes, but Joan realizes that a new
part of her personality has come to light: "I've never hit
anyone else with a bottle, so they never got to see that part
of me. Neither did I, come to think of it" (380). The humor
of the final scene has led some critics to conclude that Joan
does not learn anything from her experience,[5] but Atwood ad-
mitted in an interview with J. R. Struthers, if the protag-
onist of Surfacing progresses an inch, then Joan progresses
"3/4s of an inch" (25). At the end of the novel, the new
Joan decides to return to Toronto and to try to fit the sep-
arate parts of her life back together--clear evidence of her
transformation.

Magic spells, people, and objects do not have a place
in realistic fiction; thus, in Atwood's two most recent nov-
els, these fairy tale elements almost disappear entirely.
The novels, however, still present isolation and taking ac-
tion as important parts of the heroine's development.

Even the form of Life Before Man emphasizes isolation.
As M. Sharon Jeannotte explains, "the device of splitting
the narrative into three different points of view, those of

the three major characters, is one of the most effective of
the means Atwood uses to emphasize their isolation from each
other" (74). The characters are also isolated from their
families: Elizabeth's mother, father, and sister are dead;
Nate's father is dead, and he has no siblings; Lesje goes
home to visit her mother and father only at Christmas.

Lesje, who is most like the fairy tale princess in her
naiveté, still longs for magical transformations. She thinks
objects can have magical powers; as a child those sacred ob-
jects were found in the museum--"quartz, amethyst, basalt"
(95). As an adult, she dreams of discovering a lost world
that she can name after herself. That new world, however,
is to be found within herself, not in external reality.

There is so little room for hope in Life Before Man
that to discuss transformation almost seems to be reading
things into the novel. But each of the narrators takes a
tiny step forward by acting to supply something that is miss-
ing from his or her life. Lesje has tried to remain unin-
volved in life by pursuing an interest in dinosaurs. Her
action is to throw out her birth-control pills, become preg-
nant, and to try to adjust to thinking of herself as a "cause"
(308), a doer. In Linda Hutcheon's analysis of the novel,
the pregnancy symbolizes Lesje's renunciation of "the passiv-
ity that permits victimization"; in addition, the pregnancy
is important because it is a creative act (29). The preg-
nancy may be ill-timed and ill-advised, but the importance

of this action for Lesje cannot be denied. Before her action,
Lesje contemplates killing herself; after the action, Lesje
finds she no longer has to escape into the land of dinosaurs.

Like Lesje, Nate tries to remain uninvolved--especially
in politics. His important action is filling in for his
mother, handing out leaflets, getting signatures on a peti-
tion for a political cause. As he walks away from the booth,
he concentrates on losing himself "among the apathetic, the
fatalistic, the uncommitted, the cynical; among whom he
would like to feel at home" (306). The phrase "would like"
implies that Nate does not feel comfortable being disinter-
ested, uninvolved, noncommittal. He finally realizes that
remaining detached from politics rubs against his true na-
ture. His cynicism is transformed too, as Nate allows "room
for hope and also for disaster" (314) in the political scene
and in his relationship with Lesje.

Elizabeth also pursues a new direction at the end of
the novel. She has not been afraid to act and wield power
throughout the novel; in fact, she plays the stepmother/
witch role in relation to Nate and Lesje, trying to prevent
them from becoming a couple. Ambitious, strong-willed women
in traditional fairy tales, as Marcia Lieberman notes, are
almost always villainesses. But Atwood treats Elizabeth
sympathetically, detailing the traumatic childhood that has
warped Elizabeth's personality. Even the witch can undergo
a transformation in this novel. Looking at an exhibition of

Chinese peasant art, Elizabeth realizes that the artists
have painted "not what they see but what they want" (316).
Elizabeth knows that "China is not paradise; paradise does
not exist" (316), yet the paintings show her the positive
ability of humankind to hope for something better. The last
line of the novel shows Elizabeth, for the first time, allow-
ing herself an act of hope, an act of faith: "China does
not exist. Nevertheless she longs to be there" (317).

Bodily Harm follows the realistic vein established in
Life Before Man. Rennie literally isolates herself from Gris-
wold by moving to Toronto. The ultimate isolated person,
however, is the tourist, which Rennie becomes when she flies
to St. Antoine. Like the princess in the fairy tale, a tour-
ist is a passive observer most of the time, rather than an
active participant. Rennie is also isolated from her body;
since having a mastectomy, she has been unable to make love
or to feel anything. She is numb both physically and emo-
tionally, resembling an earlier Atwood heroine, the narrator
of Surfacing.

Like other Atwood heroines, Rennie hopes that someone
will rescue her. She thinks Daniel, her doctor, has magical
hands that can cure her of cancer and other dangers: "at the
moment she believed in it, the touch of the hand that could
transform you, change everything, magic" (175). Rennie later
realizes that his hands have no magic when Daniel finally
beds her; as he dresses afterwards, Rennie sees that he is

not a rescuer: "She was supposed to be the needy one, but it was the other way around" (211).

Realizing that Daniel's hands have no magic does not clear the way for Rennie's transformation. Neither does her affair with Paul, although it gives her back the sense of touch. In Sharon Wilson's analysis of the novel, Rennie must discard her camera to undergo metamorphosis because "it literally operates as a distancing shield" (3). In fairy tale terms, the camera functions as a magical object with negative powers. It flattens out real emotions and events onto a two-dimensional surface, thereby distancing Rennie from and disallowing contact with her photographic subjects. The camera also transfixes its subjects, robbing them of the potential for transformation. Paradoxically it is in prison, finally separated from her camera, where Rennie starts to liberate herself.

Rennie spends her first few days in prison thinking that someone from somewhere will certainly turn up to rescue her. She is so confident of being rescued that she only picks at the meager rations she is given each day. But while witnessing a sadistically cruel treatment of the man who is mute, Rennie meets his eyes, and she realizes with a shock that "he wants her to do something" (256, emphasis mine). Immediately after this shock, Rennie wipes the dirt off a piece of chicken and says to Lora, "'We need to eat.'" Eating, essential to survival, is the first action Rennie takes.

In the next scene, Rennie witnesses at close range Lora's beating. The guards dump the unconscious Lora back into the cell, and Rennie at first refuses to go near the body:

> Rennie wants to throw up, it's no one she recog-
> nizes, she has no connection with this, there's
> nothing she can do, it's the face of a stranger,
> someone without a name, the word Lora has come
> unhooked and is hovering in the air, apart from
> this ruin, mess. . . .(263)

But Rennie has changed; she can no longer keep herself unin-volved, detached, from those around her: "it's the face of Lora after all, there's no such thing as a faceless stranger, every face is someone's, it has a name" (263). So she reaches out and touches Lora, realizing the importance of being con-nected to other people, and she hopes that touching them will make a difference: "Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born" (264). Lora's fate is ambiguous in the end, but Rennie clearly has experienced in her transformation a kind of birth.

Her new definition of "terminal" is one indication of her change; she realizes that a terminal is not just "the end of the line, where you get off," but it is also "where you can get on, to go somewhere else" (264). Another indication of her transformation is thinking of herself not as a tourist or travel writer, but as a reporter, a subversive who will write about the terrifying events she has witnessed. The final paragraph of the novel makes clear Rennie's development:

> She will never be rescued. She has already
> been rescued. She is not exempt. Instead she
> is lucky, suddenly, finally, she's overflowing
> with luck, it's this luck holding her up. (266)

No longer waiting to be rescued, finding the power within to make herself whole, Rennie is capable of facing the cruelty in the world while maintaining hope. And remaining hopeful in these circumstances is no small heroic act. In fact, Sharon Wilson argues that Rennie's transformation is greater in its extent than that of any previous Atwood heroine:

> Rennie's metamorphosis is political as well as
> personal and profoundly radical. No longer in
> the bushes waiting [Surfacing] or just begin-
> ning to see her life push into the "foreground"
> [Life Before Man], no longer finding it nec-
> essary to cut away part of herself in order to
> see "everything" [Journals of Susanna Moodie],
> Rennie has penetrated to the center of paradox
> where all boundaries fade. (12)

In her most recent novel, Atwood portrays the Rapunzel syndrome literally: Rennie may or may not get out of the literal prison, but most important, she releases herself from the self-imposed tower that has kept her isolated and passive. Of all of Atwood's heroines, Rennie most aptly fits the description given in Survival of the significance of action:

> . . .in none of our acts--even the act of looking--
> are we passive. Even the things we look at demand
> our participation, and our commitment: if this
> participation and commitment are given, what can
> result is a "jail-break," an escape from our old
> habits of looking at things, and a "re-creation,"
> a new way of seeing, experiencing and imaging--
> or imagining--which we ourselves have helped to
> shape. (246)

Thus, the heroine becomes the hero of her own life. By
transforming the passive princess into an active prince, At-
wood transforms not only her heroine, but the fairy tale
form itself.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

> "And they lived happily ever after" is one
> of the most tragic sentences in literature. It
> is tragic because it tells a falsehood about life
> and has led countless generations of people to
> expect something from human existence which is
> not possible on this fragile, failing, imper-
> fect earth.
> --Joshua Liebman, Hope for Man

The hero and heroine of the traditional fairy tale live

happily ever after. Despite their self-transformations, how-

ever, Atwood's heroines have no such guarantee. The novels

end at the point of transformation, the dénouement of the

plot, leaving the future uncertain for the heroine. The her-

oine changes, but her society does not; unbridled optimism

is therefore not possible at the end of Atwood's novels.

Atwood suggests that the novel form itself is not con-

ducive to happy endings. Although short lyrical poems can

relate happiness and other positive emotions without bring-

ing up unpleasant things, "a novel about unalloyed happiness

would have to be either very short or very boring: 'Once

upon a time John and Mary lived happily ever after, The End'"

(Survival 35). Moreover, as Atwood asserts in Murder in the

Dark, there is no such thing as a happy ending in reality:

> Don't be deluded by any other endings, they're
> all fake, either deliberately fake, with mali-
> cious intent to deceive, or just motivated by
> excessive optimism if not by downright senti-
> mentality.
>
>   The only authentic ending is the one pro-
> vided here: John and Mary die. (40)

Death is the only ending John and Mary can be assured of,

yet Atwood's novels do not end in despair any more than they

end in "excessive optimism." Living happily ever after is

an extremely romantic ending; death is an extremely realis-

tic ending. Atwood's novels avoid both extremes.

In her analysis of the ending of Life Before Man, M.

Sharon Jeannotte strikes a balance between hope and despair

that is indicative of all of Atwood's novels:

> If one reads the novel, at times, with a sense
> of frustration at the seeming inability of the
> characters to seize events and to resolve the
> conundrums of their lives, it is because Atwood
> is telling us that there are no easy solutions.
> True love does not triumph, although if it is
> lucky and works hard, it may not exactly fail,
> but only settle back into a mortgaged vine-
> covered cottage and live to see the end of its
> dreams. Nor is evil defeated: like Elizabeth,
> it only becomes tired of the constant struggle
> to win. (81)

Jeannotte's insightful allusions to the fairy tale ideas of

the triumph of true love and the defeat of evil point out

that even though Atwood's characters do not live happily ever

after as fairy tale characters do, neither do they end up at

the other extreme, despair and cynicism. Atwood's endings

are hopeful in a limited sense; the characters learn an

important lesson, but since they live in a complex, imperfect world--the real world--their lives may not change dramatically, as do Cinderella's and Sleeping Beauty's.

Atwood's insistence on realistic endings leads to her rejection of excessive optimism in any of its forms as an ending motif. Her heroines do not follow the traditional solution--getting married and living happily ever after; neither do they live out a modern fairy tale and become ardent feminists who succeed in changing the world. In an interview conducted by Gail van Varseveld, Atwood explained her endings:

> To put it in very simplistic terms, to have a woman go through awful experiences and in the end to have her rescued by joining a consciousness-raising group--that would be just as schmaltzy an ending as a Prince Charming ending. Life just isn't that simple. (66)

Living happily ever after due to marriage or feminism is not a realistic expectation. Atwood does not simply reject tradition; she also resists attempts to make her work propagandistic. As she explains in an interview, her goal is to create novels about real people:

> You get a lot of people who want you to write role model books. You know, books with strong female creatures who kind of bash everybody and come out on top, or strong motherly creatures who win. . . .Well, I got this role model stuff in the '50s and I didn't want to be a role model then and I don't want to be a role model now. ("An Atlantis Interview" 208)

Critic Carolyn Allen asserts that the inability to become a role model is a fortunate failure for the Atwood heroine:

the heroine fails to transform herself into the prescribed female role, but by failing she succeeds in discovering/uncovering who she really is. Allen adds that Atwood's endings are not ecstatically happy because by the end the protagonist is a real woman--not a mythological figure.

In their depiction of muddled, complex lives, Atwood's novels point out that fairy tale expectations have no place in today's world. Atwood creates a passive, fairy-tale-like heroine, but not for the purpose of showing how passivity wins the prince. Instead, Atwood's characters learn that being passive leads to psychological disorder and that the prince, a potential husband or lover, does not have the power to rescue these damsels from their distress. Atwood also depicts a world of binary oppositions resembling the fairy tale world of extreme contrasts, yet binary oppositions are divisive in her novels, preventing people from apprehending reality or communicating with each other. And like the fairy tales, Atwood's novels focus on the process of transformation, symbolizing the breaking of a magic spell. In Atwood's novels, however, the spell to be broken arises out of the fairy tales themselves. A life of wishful thinking-- that is, hoping for magical rescues, transformations, endings--leads inevitably to disappointment and disillusionment. Atwood would agree with Joshua Liebman's contention that trying to live happily ever after has tragic consequences.

In the place of happy endings, Atwood creates something
better for her characters, a chance to hope and to be heroic
in realistic terms. Atwood's realistic heroism is discussed
by Jeannotte in a review of Life Before Man:

> There is a certain satisfaction in the shatter-
> ing of myths and the puncturing of fantasies. On
> the other hand, the alternative of living in the
> here-and-now with real human beings, terrifying in
> their fragility and unpredictability, is not made
> particularly attractive by the events of this nov-
> el. Atwood seems to suggest, however, that we
> have little choice and that to accept the necessity
> for such a life will require a degree of quiet
> heroism which is not likely to be glorified in
> sagas or even acknowledged by subsequent genera-
> tions. (81-82)

The courage to break the magic spell, to renounce fairy tale
fantasies and accept the imperfection and failure inherent
in real existence, is manifested in small actions in the
novels: Marian's cake, the Surfacer's and Lesje's pregnan-
cies, Joan's telling the truth, Elizabeth's and Rennie's
faith in the future. Small, however, does not mean insigni-
ficant. Atwood asserts in Survival that traditional heroes
have no place in Canadian literature today; they have been
replaced by collective heroes. If all the Marians, Joans,
Elizabeths, Lesjes, Rennies of the world could transform them-
selves, the sum of their actions might change society. Or
it might not. Hence, for Atwood, heroism means accepting
the world as it is (and it is a bleak world in Life Before
Man and Bodily Harm), yet trying to live a full life never-
theless.

Ultimately, Atwood's fiction reaches beyond fairy tale formulas, transforming them to liberate her characters and perhaps their world. By using fairy tale elements, Atwood identifies an important cause of the psychological malaise that afflicts all of her heroines. Her novels, however, develop the idea of a "third thing," a way out of the binary system. Although her heroines do not move on to this third thing, most importantly, they realize that it exists. They glimpse what it would be like to live in what Atwood has called "Position Four" (Survival 38), a world that allows its inhabitants to be creative participants. Anticipating this world is not easy for the writer either, as Sherrill Grace explains:

> According to Survival, insofar as a writer is connected with his society, writing from "Position Four" is impossible until that society has been changed. And yet, Atwood has done more than merely describe the parameters of the "cartesian hell," more than dramatize and warn against its dangers. . . .she struggles to free herself, her readers, and her forms from the potentially imprisoning spaces of ideology, self, and artifact. ("Articulating the 'Space Between'" 13-14)

Fairy tales represent one of the forms, one set of myths, that have the potential to trap the Atwood heroine.

Atwood would be the last person to insist that her novels could change the world for the better, yet through the act of writing she presents a way out of the entrapments facing her characters and her readers.[1] A passage from "A Red Shirt," included in Two-Headed Poems, clearly affirms

the possibility of liberation. In the poem, the speaker is sewing a shirt for her daughter; the shirt becomes a symbol of the persona's struggle to create a better future for her daughter, to free her from the destructive traps that fairy tales, stereotypes, and myths can impose:

It is January, it's raining, this gray
ordinary day. My
daughter, I would like
your shirt to be just a shirt,
no charms or fables. But fables
and charms swarm here
in this January world,
entrenching us like snow, and few
are friendly to you; though
they are strong,
potent as viruses
or virginal angels dancing
on the heads of pins,
potent as the hearts
of whores torn out
by the roots because they were thought
to be solid gold, or heavy
as the imaginary
jewels they used to split
the heads of Jews for.

It may not be true
that one myth cancels another.
Nevertheless, in a corner
of the hem, where it will not be seen,
where you will inherit
it, I make this tiny
stitch, my private magic.

Set in the everyday--the realm of the possible--this poem, like Atwood's novels, offers the hope that through simple actions, we can break those magic spells that prevent us from becoming wholly human. Through her writing, Atwood makes transformation possible not only for her characters, but for her readers too.

NOTES

Chapter I

[1] The term "fairy tale" is an approximate translation of the German _Zaubermärchen_. Used in this thesis, the term refers to those tales that incorporate magical objects and figures within everyday existence, that center on the hero's overcoming of obstacles, that consistently end with the triumph of good and the punishment of evil.

[2] See, for example, T. D. MacLulich's article on _The Edible Woman_ and Catherine Sheldrick Ross' article on _Surfacing_.

[3] Linda Dégh cites the following: Afanasiev, collector of Russian tales; Asbjørnsen, of Norwegian tales: Erben, of Bohemian tales; Kolberg, of Polish tales; Gaál, of Hungarian tales; and Hahn, of Greek and Albanian tales.

[4] Stone also acknowledges the importance of Walt Disney's versions of Grimms' tales in popularizing them; Atwood makes an occasional allusion to Walt Disney, showing her familiarity with these revisions of Grimm.

[5] Throughout the thesis, I give the German title and/ or the number of the tale when I refer specifically to the Grimms' version because the English titles often vary dramatically. My purpose is to enable the reader to locate the tales using translations other than Magoun and Krappe.

[6] Jerome Rosenberg notes that the darker side of Grimms' tales fascinated Atwood and is connected to the use of Gothic (horrifying) elements in her fiction.

[7] Critics who see fairy tales as an adverse influence include Kay Stone, Marcia Lieberman, and Jack Zipes. Those who see the tales as a positive didactic source include Bruno Bettelheim, Alison Lurie, and Linda Dégh. Lieberman's article specifically counters Lurie's position; the final chapter in Zipes' _Breaking the Magic Spell_ refutes Bettelheim's premises.

[8] Connections are often drawn between the moralistic emphasis of the fairy tale and Christian ideals. Atwood,

however, does not develop this relation in her novels; thus, this thesis omits any discussion of the subject.

Chapter II

[1] By comparing editions of Grimms' tales translated into English from approximately the mid-nineteenth century until today, Kay Stone identifies the twelve most popular tales: "Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," "Cinderella," "Rapunzel," "The Frog Prince," "Hansel and Gretel," "Rumpelstiltskin," "King Thrushbeard," "The Little Goose Girl," "Red Riding Hood," "Frau Holle," and "The Six Swans." Of this list, "Hansel and Gretel" appears to be an exception to the passive female, active male pattern.

Chapter III

[1] _Terror and Erebus_ is a CBC play that is not in print; therefore, I quote this passage as it appears in Atwood's _Survival_ on page 110.

[2] The mind/body dichotomy is given more than passing consideration in Sherrill Grace's _Violent Duality_, as well as in Gloria Onley's, Gary Ross', and Catherine McLay's articles listed in the bibliography.

[3] _Surfacing_ is an exception to this generalization. Because of its isolated setting (the other novels are set at least part of the time in Toronto), there is no society to reinforce bourgeois moral norms.

Chapter IV

[1] For a Jungian interpretation of the psychological meaning of fairy tales, see Marie-Louise von Franz' book. Atwood's and Jung's views of personal wholeness are very similar.

[2] I realize that Nate is not a heroine. However, his character sometimes fits the pattern I have traced, so I occasionally include him as an example along with Lesje and Elizabeth.

[3] See pages 134-149 in _The Fairy Tale as Art Form and Portrait of Man_ for a more detailed description.

4 An earlier scene actually prepares the stage for
Marian's rejection of this image. As she follows Duncan
into the ravine, "She had a vision of the red dress disin-
tegrating in mid-air, falling in little scraps behind her
in the snow, like feathers" (267). The feathers not only
indicate an outer appearance being stripped away, but they
also function as a synecdoche for a bird, which is a sym-
bol of the inner spirit. Marian's vision, thus, precedes
her own transformation from image to integrated personality.

5 For example, see Catherine Sheldrick Ross' article
on Lady Oracle.

Chapter V

1 Annis Pratt discusses "the rhetorical effect of re-
birth fiction" in her article on Surfacing. She argues that
rebirth fiction--a genre which includes all of Atwood's
novels, in my opinion--transforms both the heroine and the
reader.

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