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Atwoodian Gothic: Trauma and Writing in Margaret Atwood's

*Lady Oracle*

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* critically employs Gothic conventions to discuss a female artist's traumatic relationship with her mother and her quest for her own multiple identities through unconventional Gothic writings. As an Atwoodian anti-Gothic novel, *Lady Oracle* focuses on female body, identity, and complicated mother-daughter relationship. By appropriating Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny and theory of trauma, I argue that Atwood explores a female artist's traumatic experiences in her childhood and adolescence, highlights her dilemma between desire for artistic career and for fulfilling ideal femininity, and finally investigates the artist's reconciliation with her dead mother and acceptance of her multiple selves. Chapter One examines Atwood's appropriation of Gothic elements and her revision of three fairy tales, including "The Bluebeard," "The Red Shoes," and "The Little Mermaid." Chapter Two analyzes the protagonist's traumatic experiences and repetition compulsion as well as her maternal legacy. Chapter Three illuminates the protagonist's psychological journeys to communicate with her mother and her past selves. The last chapter discusses the ambiguous ending of this novel.

**Key Words:** Atwoodian Gothic, female body, identity, trauma, mother-daughter relationship

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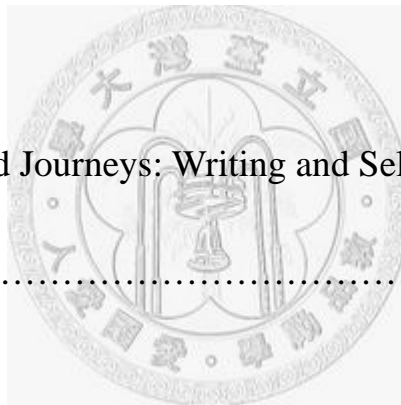
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## Introduction

### Atwoodian Anti-Gothic: The Perils of Gothic Thinking

#### I. Atwood's Self-Reflexive Appropriation of the Gothic

In her interview with Karla Hammond, Atwood reflects on her intention of Gothic writing:

I'm interested in the Gothic novel because it's very much a woman's form. Why is there such a wide readership for books that essentially say, "Your husband is trying to kill you"? People aren't interested in pop culture books out of pure random selection. They connect with something real in people's lives. There's usually an area of reality in popular literature that's hooking into the reality in the lives of the readers. Even Harlequin Romances. Those books are about the dream that we all secretly have—that everything can work out, that everything can be happy, that there is a Mr. Wonderful who does exist. The Gothic form centers on *My husband is trying to kill me*, and that's of great interest when you think about it. (Ingersoll 107-8, italics original)

Atwood is concerned with a gender-specific genre, the Gothic (romances), and its connection with women's (mis)understanding of the differences between romantic fantasy and reality. She utilizes Gothic elements to narrate her tales and simultaneously critiques Gothic conventions and their underlying assumptions, such as value systems and power relations coded in the texts. Besides incorporating Gothic conventions to her own purposes, Atwood engages in not only rewriting ancient myths and fairy tales but also invoking allusions to other literary texts. In a sense, Atwoodian Gothic exhibits the function of intertextuality: "By making the reader aware of the intertextual reference or allusion, the text alluded to is allowed a dialogue with the frame narrative; moreover, the self-reflexive, metafictional nature of the frame narrative is exposed at the same time" (Ljungberg 25). Atwood's

self-conscious revision of the embedded fairy tales, myths, and classical stories inverts received images and reflects a changing society. In Atwoodian Gothic, it is easy to see the traditional forms which are modified but still retain their original charge of menace and mystery, while balancing women's urge toward self-discovery and self-assertiveness with self-doubts (Howells 64). She explores women's immersion in Gothic fantasies and fairy tales, both of which convey romantic myths, female fears, and repressed desires. In so doing, Atwood accentuates women's sense of not being free of traditional assumptions and myths about femininity.

Instead of completely discarding Gothic conventions, Atwood engages in reshaping the familiar materials of a "product" (the thing read, written) so as to analyze the dynamic "process" (reading, writing) (Hutcheon 138). The relationship between "product" and "process" also foregrounds the tension between "the outward-directed didactic / mimetic motivation" and "the more inward-directed self-reflexivity" (Hutcheon 140). Atwood's novel, *Lady Oracle*, exemplifies her efforts to employ the conventional elements of Gothic romance, but at the same time expose stereotypical representations of men and women, cultural / ideological influences behind the appeal for female readers, and insidious fantasy of female victimization. By portraying Joan Foster as living a Gothic heroine's life and writing Gothic novels, Atwood shows the heroine's confinement within the paradigms of conventional femininity. Moreover, Atwood's use of Gothic features lays bare the limits of such literary conventions and the need of her female protagonist to confront complex reality. Written from a self-consciously feminist perspective, *Lady Oracle* investigates complex notions of female body and identity which problematize dominant gender ideologies of Western / patriarchal society.

Both Eleonora Rao and Susanne Becker point out the importance of parody in *Lady Oracle*, revealing how the novel is a self-reflexive exploration of canonical, dominant literary forms (Rao134, Becker 153). Karen F. Stein also argues that Atwood not merely plays the

role of a trickster who delights in fabricating, crossing generic boundaries, and disrupting conventions, but also often uses humor, parody, and satire to expose hypocrisy and pretension (6). Indeed, Atwood uses parody as a “metalanguage” to re-evaluate literary materials from a critical perspective and to effect discontinuity (Rao 29). Adopting a critical and ironic perspective on Gothic romance, she simultaneously describes and subverts ideological discourses and gender construction prevalent in the texts. In writing *Lady Oracle*, Atwood expresses “women’s concerns” for the roles they play and the life stories they tell. As she admits, “I’ve always wondered what it was about these books that appealed— do so many women think of themselves as menaced on all sides, and of their husbands as potential murderers? And what about that ‘Mad Wife’ left over from *Jane Eyre*? Are these our secret plots?” (Ingersoll 75). While Joanna Russ sees Gothic texts as a kind of “justified paranoia,” Atwood reminds us of the necessity to probe into the appeal of stories of persecuted heroines (Modleski 61). The potentiality of men to be murderers as well as rescuers of dependent women is inscribed in the culture and in the novels produced by the culture. Through her writing, Atwood undertakes her responsibility as a writer to examine the interaction between gender relations and socio-historical formations

## **II. *Lady Oracle* as Anti-Gothic**

Atwoodian Gothic, in essence, is anti-Gothic. As Atwood points out, an anti-Gothic examines “the perils of Gothic thinking” (Ingersoll 64). In her interview with J.R. Struthers, Atwood suggests that *Lady Oracle* is an “anti-Gothic” novel in which she reveals and parodies the perils of Gothic thinking:

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 rescuer, 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 the real

people don't fit these two-dimensional roles, you can either discard the roles and try to deal with the real person or discard the real person. (Ingersoll 64)

Joan's fascination with romantic plots and Gothic thinking causes her to treat her lovers as heroes at first and then as villains. When she escapes from her relentless mother to England, Joan is immediately rescued by her first lover, the Polish Count. However, as their relationship turns worse, the Polish Count begins to frighten Joan. Besides finding a revolver in his drawer, Joan also feels so threatened by his "baleful glances and the oppressive silences" that she decides to leave him (LO 193). Joan meets her second hero when she is thinking about the plot of her Gothic romance, *Escape from Love*. Their encounter is like a typical Gothic scenario— a helpless maiden running from an evil man finally meets her hero: "*There were footsteps behind her. She shrank into the shade of a tree, hoping to escape notice, but a shadow loomed against the setting sun, there was a hand on her arm, and a voice, hoarse with passion, breathed her name*" (LO197, italics original). In reality, "there was a hand on [Joan's arm]. [She] screamed, quite loudly, and the next thing [she] knew [she] was lying on top of a skinny, confused-looking young man. Pieces of paper were scattered over [them] like oversized confetti" (LO197). Joan never hesitates to identify with the Gothic heroine who enacts the ready-made scripts for male persecutors and female victims. The parallel between her real life and her Gothic romance suggests that Joan is so overwhelmed by Gothic paranoia that she believes that the Polish Count or somebody tries to hurt her. After leaving the Gothic world of *Escape from Love*, Joan in the real world is attracted to another romantic plot, namely, falling in love at the first sight. "I looked at him more closely. [...] A melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes, idealistic and doomed, sort of like Lord Byron, whose biography I had just been skimming. We finished collecting the pamphlets, I fell in love" (LO 198). While working on *Escape from Love*, Joan literally falls in love with a "Byronic hero." It seems that Joan hardly awakes from her Gothic fantasy and returns to reality. Atwood exposes and criticizes her protagonist's



tendency to apply the patterns and roles in Gothic romances to her real life. This young man does have a heroic name, Arthur. They get married but do not live happily ever after. Joan lives a duplicitous life because she wonders “if [Arthur had] known what I really like, would he still have loved me?” (LO 39). After receiving some voiceless phone calls and threatening letters, Joan suspects that Arthur wants to kill her because he may discover the secrets about her past and her identity as a Gothic writer. Therefore, she chooses to run away, just like those “heroines on the run” in her Gothic romances. Joan interprets her life as if it were a Gothic text. As she claims, “[e]very man I’d ever been involved with, I realized, had had two selves”(LO 357). Men are regarded by her as the Gothic heroes who simultaneously assume the roles of villain and rescuer.

To define *Lady Oracle* as anti-Gothic, Atwood compares her novel with Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. Both Austen and Atwood expose and criticize the Gothic heroines’ inclination to apply the patterns and roles in Gothic fiction to the real world; to mistake life for fiction. Both of them exploit a recurrent motif in Gothic fiction, that is, the obscure cause of the wife’s death. Austen’s heroine, Catherine Morland, who indulges herself in Gothic stories (Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*), believes that her lover’s father, General Tilney, murders his wife. Atwood’s heroine, Joan Foster, also attributes her mother’s death to her father: “He was a doctor, he’d been in the underground, he’d killed people before, he would know how to break her neck and make it look like an accident. Despite his furrows and sighs he was smug, like a man who’d gotten away with something” (LO 215). Driven by Gothic thinking, Joan immerses herself in her imagination and seeks to prove her father’s guilt. Although Austen and Atwood create a mocking parody of the Gothic themes, it is worth discussing their difference. Austen’s sharper criticism of Gothic writers and readership seems to educate her readers towards a more critical literary taste while Atwood’s portrayal implicitly critiques the readers’ need for escapist literature, such as Gothic romance (Rao 30,137). Atwood claims that “[m]ost people find real life sadly

lacking because it doesn't measure up. Escape fiction, or Louis L'Amour's Westerns, is a kind of wide-awake dreaming. It's the enactment of a plot that is quite basic to a lot of people" (Ingersoll 167). In other words, Atwood is sympathetic as well as critical towards Gothic romance. For her, the Gothic text, different from the real world full of complexities, risks, and changes, presents "the simplicity of that world, where happiness was possible and wounds were only ritual ones" (LO 346). Joan's obsession with Gothic fantasy is "produced within, and determined by, its social context" and serves as compensation for "a lack resulting from cultural constraints" (Jackson3). Examining the compensatory function of Gothic fiction, Atwood, like Austen, insists that the readers should learn to distinguish imaginary worlds from the real world although she does not deny the pleasure gained from reading Gothic novels.

According to Ann McMillan, what permeates Gothic fantasy is the reinforcement of women's innocent victimhood and the predictable ending by transforming villains into heroes at the hands of virtuous heroines (53). Her statement sheds light on a dangerous Gothic thinking in which women's acceptance of victimization is related to their anticipation of a happy ending. They believe in the advent of the hero who is converted by "romantic love." To counter such a belief, Atwood challenges "triumph of true love" and "happy ending" prevalent in Gothic romances. In *Lady Oracle*, although all of Joan's lovers have names suggesting royalty— the Polish Count, Arthur, and the Royal Porcupine, none of them turn out to be the prince she hopes to find (Stein 61). Atwood discloses the veil of heroes and makes these men more "realistic" by giving them true names and ordinary habits. The Polish Count's true name is Paul. The Royal Porcupine's true name is Chuck Brewer. As for Arthur, after living with him, Joan realizes that he, unlike the Gothic hero living in a castle, "leave[s] [his] socks on the floor or stick[s] [his] fingers in [his] ears or gargle[s] in the mornings to kill germs" (LO 261).

Moreover, Atwood calls into question the simplistic opposition between (female) victims

and (male) victimizers. She comments on Joan Foster's self-imposed victimization:

She's not particularly a victim. Although she's a survivor, I wouldn't say that that's what categorizes her. Certainly many of her complicated problems are caused, not by her victimhood or her survivorhood, but by her romanticism. She's someone who is attempting to act out a romantic myth we're all handed as women in a non-romantic world. (Ingersoll 107)

The distinction between (male) victimizers and (female) victims is not absolute. Women's insistence on their passivity and victimhood may lead them to unwittingly endorse patriarchal conventions. Also, such self-perception precludes women from taking responsibility. The Gothic thinking sacrifices human complexity, justifies female ritual victimization, and reinforces the limits of social conventions. Atwood's anti-Gothic aims to defy the view of traditional Gothic as a means to restore and "reassert the values of society, virtue and propriety" (Botting 7). Gothic fiction which is filled with escapist fantasies and women's self-renunciation provides temporary alleviation and an outlet for women's feeling of frustration or despair. However, these stories simultaneously represent "collective repression and suppression," which perhaps end in more destructive results: further (self-)victimization, fragile interpersonal connections, and unresolved anguish (Vickroy 4). In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood portrays how a woman's traumatic experiences lead to her immersion in Gothic fantasy and how she deals with her trauma by re-establishing the bond with her mother. As an "anti-Gothic," *Lady Oracle* presents a female artist's pursuit of, not a happy union with the hero, but reconciliation with her mother as well as her inner selves.

### **III. Overview of the Thesis**

Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, which exploits and parodies the Gothic genre, poses questions about female body, writing, and identity. Atwood employs Gothic features to depict a female artist's traumatic experiences and her self-discovery through writing. The

protagonist of the novel, Joan Foster, is a Gothic heroine who seeks to escape from threats and yearns to be rescued and loved by the novel's various heroes. In addition to a clandestine writer of Gothic romances, Joan Foster is also the famous poet of a book of mysterious poems, "Lady Oracle." As a female artist figure, she encounters the dilemma of being torn between art and love. Many critics observe that Joan Foster fabricates her life story and her vicarious Gothic heroines to forget her painful past and to evade her unacknowledged complicity (Fee 44, Ljungberg 113, Rigney 62, Stein 61).

Joan Foster's Gothic novels reflect literary conventions and social demands on women. In the process of writing, not only do her past memories haunt her but she also develops multiple identities. Thus, Joan leads a life full of hallucination and duplicity. Eventually, her writing becomes her survival tool economically and psychically. She writes the poems, "Lady Oracle," to express her anxiety about marriage and fear of loss of identity. Moreover, in the course of writing her latest Gothic Romance, *Stalked by Love*, Joan Foster gradually sees through the monstrous appearance of her mother who is both a victimizer and a victim. As Becker notes, *Lady Oracle* presents the feminist Gothic's critiques of the problematic dimensions of feminine ideals when Atwood repeats those ideals but reinforces the hidden horrors of the heroine (159). The plot of *Stalked by Love* parallels Joan Foster's life and leads her to confront her multiple selves returning from the past. This significant encounter helps Joan Foster free herself from the long-term duplicitous life, accept "the monstrous / inadequate part inside her" (Sciff-Zamaro 37), and learn to cope with her multiple selves.

This thesis aims to discuss the following question. In exploring and revisiting the conventions of Gothic romance, how does *Lady Oracle* examine the process of the protagonist's confrontation with trauma and reveal her recognition through Gothic writings? I argue that in *Lady Oracle*, Atwood explores a female artist's traumatic experiences caused by patriarchal conventions which impinge on her body and identity, highlights her ambivalence toward artistic career and love, and finally suggests that Joan Foster's writing

helps her accomplish the quests for self and her dead mother.

Chapter One examines how Atwood critically appropriates a number of Gothic elements to make *Lady Oracle* a haunted text while at the same time rewriting fairy tales to reveal her Gothic heroine's innermost fears. The first section draws on Freud's theory of the uncanny and related concepts, such as the return of the repressed, the unspeakable, live burial, and the double. By discussing the spectral appearance of Joan's mother, the Fat Lady fantasy and Joan's old clothes which come to life, I argue that Joan is haunted by her traumatic past and subject to the prescriptive notions of female body and identity. The second section explores Atwood's revision of three fairy tales: "The Bluebeard," "The Red Shoes," and "The Little Mermaid." The Bluebeard tale has different versions. Atwood exploits the version in *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. By rewriting a well-known tale, Atwood examines the juxtaposition of women's reliance on men's rescue and female fear of male violence. Atwood employs Hans Christian Andersen's "The Red Shoes" and "The Little Mermaid" to analyze her protagonist's dilemma between artistic career and men's love.

Chapter Two centers on Joan's relationship with her mother. This chapter discusses Joan's traumatic experiences and her mother's gender inculcation, both of which entrap Joan in repetitions of self-denial and indulgence to the plots of Gothic romances. Analysis of Joan's trauma sheds light on the socio-cultural systems in which she lives. The first section focuses on Joan's traumatic experiences in her childhood and adolescence, including her ambivalent relationship with her mother, her failed ballet performance, her identity crisis for being called "an accident" by her mother, her suffering from the Brownies' bullies, and her mother's death. Being traumatized, Joan's behavior, nightmares, and Gothic writing can be regarded as stemming from "repetition compulsion," which represents trauma survivor's impotent attempt to dominate traumatic events by reenacting previous experiences. The second section delves into the influences of her mother's gender inculcation on Joan's preoccupation with her body and her belief in women's passivity and victimhood. I suggest

that Joan's choice to write Gothic romances is not by mere chance. As a product of the maternal legacy, Joan's Gothic romances duplicate the myth of idealized femininity and gender stereotypes.

Chapter Three explores Joan's underground quests for her dead mother and her multiple identities in the process of writing "Lady Oracle" and *Stalked by Love*. The first section illustrates Joan's reconciliation with her dead mother when she creates a collection of poems, "Lady Oracle." I investigate Atwood's use of Goddess myths and intertextual allusion to Alfred Tennyson's "the Lady of Shalott." First of all, Atwood reverses the Greek mythology of Demeter and Persephone. It is the daughter who saves her mother from the underworld. Joan uses her writing to retrieve her mother's existence. Then Atwood employs the myth of the Triple Goddess to reveal the multiple dimensions within Joan's mother who is seen as three-headed monster in Joan's dream. Moreover, Atwood's intertextual allusion to Tennyson's "the Lady of Shalott" reveals similar difficulties confronting Joan and her mother (as well as most women). The dominant themes in "the Lady of Shalott" of female incarceration, self-renunciation for love, and tragic death also prevail in the life story of Joan's mother. After understanding her mother's predicament, Joan finally comes to terms with her mother. Joan's quest for her mother is conducive to her introspection. The second section concentrates on Joan's self-discovery. First, I discuss Joan's identification with the Gothic villainess of her novel, *Stalked by Love*, and her critical reflections on Gothic romances. Joan starts to doubt and challenge idealized femininity embodied by the virtuous Gothic heroine, the inevitable death of the threatening Gothic villainess, and heterosexual marriage as the only happy ending. Second, I explore Joan's confrontation with her obliterated past and acceptance of her multiple selves. I argue that Joan gradually possesses a new perception of self in the course of reconstructing her bond with her deceased mother. By handling her traumatic relationship with her mother, Joan is able to embrace her multiple selves as part of herself.

In Conclusion I examine the ambiguous ending of *Lady Oracle*. Joan finally gives up being a Gothic romance writer and tells her story to a male reporter. While some critics think that Joan makes no progress because she still falls into another romantic relationship with the reporter, I argue instead that Atwood shows the female artist's voice to tell her story and her resistance to a conclusive interpretation.



## Chapter One

### A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman

Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* is not only a female Gothic novel but also a Künstlerroman. Atwood portrays a female artist's pursuit of her identity and the struggles with her mother as well as her discarded selves. Facing the difficulties in her life, the protagonist, Joan Foster, is preoccupied with fear. As Ellen Moers observes, "fear" is the overriding force behind the Gothic in which "fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare" (90). Nevertheless, Atwood's *Lady Oracle* is not merely intended to scare. Its principal aim is to examine the reasons behind the Gothic heroine's fear. In *Love, Mystery and Misery*, Coral Ann Howells argues that Gothic novels are full of unresolved conflicts and repressions, accompanied by crises which are the outward signs of inward tensions, but consistently avoid any clear analysis of the relation between startling effects and their possible causes (13).

Atwood, instead, employs Gothic texts and exploits fairy tales to probe into notions of gender construction, particularly in relation to female identity and body. Feminist criticism views Gothic novels as stories of gender inequality and women's concomitant anxieties. Becker furthermore lays bare the psychological disturbances of the Gothic heroine's mental state: She is "a divided subject" who is torn between "the conscious and socially acceptable movement towards the 'happy ending' with the hero" and "the unconscious and socially muted desire for a female community" ("Postmodern Feminine Horror Fiction" 76). Therefore, there is always a gap between the feminine ideal and women's ability to fulfill this ideal, particularly, in the form of a disciplined female body. Gothic horrors are related to the complex process of constructing female subjectivity and the development towards such an illusion of ideal femininity. It is the myth of idealized femininity that shapes Gothic forms.



If Gothic texts are treated seriously, we may realize that all the details and abnormalities are symptoms indicative of unconscious desires and fears. In this chapter, I argue that Atwood employs conventional Gothic elements and rewrites fairy tales to illuminate Joan Foster's haunted traumatic past and her fear of male rejection / violence as well as loss of identity.

## I. Gothic Elements

Howells points out that fear is the core of the Gothic sensibility, including fear of ghosts, fear of the dark, women's fear of men, fear of what is hidden but might leap out unexpectedly, and fear of something floating around loose which lurks behind everyday reality (63).

Creating the atmosphere and emotion of fear is obviously bound up with the hallmark of Gothic fiction, the uncanny. Sigmund Freud's significant essay on the uncanny was first published in 1919. It begins with a broad definition. "The uncanny is undoubtedly related to what is frightening— to what arouses dread and horror... it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general" ("The Uncanny" 219). He further thinks of the uncanny as the effect of projecting unconscious desires and fears onto the environment or other people. The uncanny constitutes "the class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" ("The Uncanny" 220). For instance, a lot of hair-raising delineation in literature is inspired by hidden anxieties concealed within the subject, who then interprets the world according to his or her apprehension. The first step toward understanding this notion is to examine the word in German. The Uncanny (*das Unheimlich*) is the negation of *das Heimlich* that signifies both homely (*heimlich*) and native (*heimisch*) ("The Uncanny" 220). The connotation of *das Heimlich* includes something familiar, friendly, cheerful, comfortable, and intimate. On the contrary, *das Unheimlich* summons up the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, strange, alien, and unknown. In addition, while *das Heimlich* is related to something hidden and obscured, *das Unheimlich* indicates that something that ought to remain hidden and kept out of sight is exposed, uncovered. Thus, the uncanny revelation effects a disturbing

transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar. Freud concludes that the uncanny is “in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (“The Uncanny” 241). Freud also regards anything uncanny or anything that provokes dread as being caused by cultural taboos. The drives which challenge the reality principle have to be repressed because of cultural continuity. Many uncanny incidents are the embodiment of long familiar anxieties and desires which have undergone repression and now return from it. The uncanny which prevails in Gothic texts allows an articulation of the unutterable which threatens to transgress social norms.

In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out two crucial elements in the Gothic: the unspeakable and live burial (4-5). In fact, both elements are related to Freud’s conception of the uncanny because they are simultaneously familiar and alien to us. These two elements also indicate what is hidden, secret, repressed since it is often blocked off from consciousness, and something menacing because it is alive and ready to spring out, transformed into some monstrous shape (Howells 63). In *Lady Oracle*, the mother’s astral body, the Fat Lady fantasy, and the old clothes buried underground all convey the uncanny and supernatural images as well as the protagonist’s obsession with her past, no matter how hard she tries to forget.

Joan’s mother, Frances Delacourt, is her formidable rival. She desperately wants to leave her mother’s home and plans to start a different life by creating new identities. Yet, her mother and all the agnozing memories about her ceaselessly haunt Joan. The appearance of her mother’s astral body signifies the return of the dead and, more specifically, the return of the repressed. After leaving home for a long time, Joan suddenly sees her mother in her apartment:

She was standing, very upright, on the clay-colored rug, dressed in her navy-blue suit with the white collar; her white gloves, hat and shoes were immaculate, and she

was clutching her purse under her arm. Her face was made up, she'd drawn a bigger mouth around her mouth with lipstick, but the shape of her own mouth showed through. Then I saw that she was crying soundlessly, horribly; mascara was running from her eyes in black tears. (LO 208)

This supernatural phenomenon vividly expresses the feeling of uncanniness. The ghost of Joan's mother is a peculiar commingling of familiar and unfamiliar because she wears her usual dress but unusually cries in front of her daughter. In addition, a ghost arouses the viewer's terror and discomfort because the return of the dead disturbs the symbolic order. Admittedly, the emblematic fear within Gothic fantasy is that somebody or something that seems to be dead and buried might not be dead at all. Thus, Gothic terror is aroused when something familiar or unknown cross the forbidden barriers between dream and waking, life and death. Furthermore, her mother's silence makes Joan more disconcerted and angry. She cannot help wondering, "[w]hat did she want from me? Why couldn't she leave me alone?" (209). The uncertainty of silence aggravates the viewer's fear but at the same time it implies that something secret has come to light. Because their traumatic relationship in the past remains unresolved, Frances, in order to communicate with her daughter, makes her way crossing the boundary between life and death. In consequence, the mother's ghost, infringing on the symbolic order, constantly haunts the daughter.

According to Freud, "the primitive fear of the dead is still so strong within us and always ready to come to the surface on any provocation. Most likely our fear still implies the old belief that the dead man becomes the enemy of his survivor and seeks to carry him off to share his new life with him" ("The Uncanny" 242). To survive and get a different life from her mother, the Gothic heroine not merely fears being "like" her mother, sharing the same fate, but also fears "being her mother." In Gothic tradition, the evocation of the uncanny involves the figures of the double with emphases on identity in physical appearance and the feeling that past and present are intermingled (Modleski 69-70). Since she has

uncanny sensations that the past is repeating itself through her, the Gothic heroine feels suffocated and desperate in her inability to break free of the past. Needless to say, Joan does not want to be (like) her mother. Yet, they definitely mirror each other. Atwood has the daughter repeat a similar destiny and exhibit similar habits of her mother despite their different physical features. Frances ran away from home at sixteen. Similarly, Joan leaves her mother's house at nineteen seeking a better life. Both advocate ideal femininity and marriage at first, but eventually witness a disillusionment with romantic ideology. After going through disappointing marriages, both indulge themselves in palliatives. In other words, Frances relies on alcohol when she realizes that she cannot help her husband's career. She drinks more and more as soon as she feels solitary and abandoned by her husband and daughter. As for Joan, she counts heavily on writing Gothic romances to take a break from her marriage with a politically frenzied husband. Joan admits that "[i]t was only after I got married that my writing became for me anything more than an easy way of earning a living. I'd always felt sly about it, as if I was getting away with something and nobody had found me out" (LO 257). Joan even compares her Gothic writing to painkillers. Without it, Joan, like her mother, "drink[s] too much" (LO 258). As Atwood observes, "the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's own self which has split off" (Fee 65). Therefore, on the level of the supernatural, there is the phenomenon of ghosts transgressing boundaries between life and death, while on the psychological level there is the erosion of boundaries between the self and the monstrous (m)Other (Howells 63).

In addition to her mother's spectral return, Joan also experiences the Fat Lady fantasy several times. The origin of the fantasy is traced to a childhood memory when her Aunt Lou took her to the Canadian National Exhibition but kept her from visiting "the Freak Show" (LO 103). The Fat Lady was a public display of "the fattest woman in the world," but Joan never saw her although she wanted to. Without seeing the real person, Joan depends on her imagination to construct the first of the Fat Lady's images: she is "sitting on a chair, knitting,

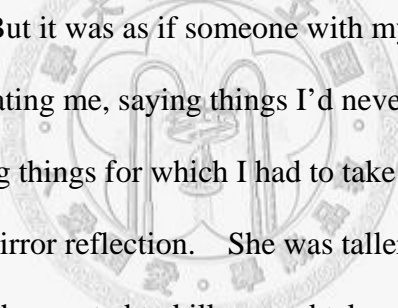
while lines and lines of thin gray faces filed past her, looking, looking” and she wears “gauze pants and a maroon satin brassiere, like the dancing girls, and red slippers. [...] One day she would rebel, she would do something” (LO 104). The recurrence of the Fat Lady fantasy shows that uncanny events involve a sense of repetition and unsettle time and space, order and sense (Royle 2). Whether she is obese or slim, Joan is inclined to intertwine herself with the Fat Lady who gradually penetrates her daily life. For example, when Joan and Arthur watch the Olympic doubles figure-skating championships, she suddenly believes that the female skater becomes the Fat Lady, in a new costume:

The Fat Lady skated out onto the ice. I couldn't help myself. It was one of the most important moments in my life, I should have been able to keep her away, but out she came in a pink skating costume, her head ornamented with swan's-down. With her was the thinnest man in the world. [...] Her secret was that although she was so large, she was very light, she was hollow, like a helium balloon, they had to keep her tethered to her bed or she'd drifted away, all night she strained at the ropes. [...] They were going to shoot her down in cold blood, explode her, despite the fact that she had now burst into song.... (LO 333-4; ellipses in source)

The appearance of the Fat Lady “corrodes the vision of reality” and “abolishes time and space” (Day 34). Although Joan has never seen the Fat Lady, her innermost anxiety about her true identity and her uneasiness about the relationship with men intermingle and result in the unpredictable appearance of the Fat Lady. At the moment of its occurrence, Joan is caught between her marriage with Arthur and her affair with the Royal Porcupine. Each man has different expectations of Joan whose true self is buried in order to meet social demands. Furthermore, Joan's dancing Fat Lady is the representation of her own miserable ballet performance in her childhood. This experience of déjà-vu is an uncanny revelation of Joan's repressed past. Atwood examines the horror of imprisonment within the female body. Initially, Joan is trapped by her body as a result of her “grotesque” obesity. Yet, when she

loses weight, Joan continues to be haunted by visions of the Fat Lady and by her former fat self. Joan's anxiety about her body also triggers her identity crisis. In Gothic texts, the fear of loss of identity is manifested through the frequent appearances of doubles and mirrors (Ljungberg 125). As Joan describes, "[w]hen 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" (LO 259). Joan's fat self, embodied by the Fat Lady, is like her double and her "shadowy twin, thin when [Joan is] fat, fat when [Joan is] thin" (LO 298).

Joan tries hard to get rid of the fat self and to erase her previous life. When she becomes a celebrity because of her well-received poems, her effort to conceal the past fails. Thus, Joan fears being exposed in public and feels being taken over by her dark twin:



I felt very visible. But it was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I'd never said but which appeared in the newspapers, doing things for which I had to take the consequences: my dark twin, my funhouse-mirror reflection. She was taller than I was, more beautiful, more threatening. She wanted to kill me and take my place, and by the time she did this no one would notice the difference because the media were in on the plot, they were helping her. (LO 304)

Her innermost fear is aroused because of her dark twin who owns a "more threatening" power. Since Joan subjects herself to the prescriptive myths of ideal femininity advocated by mass media and patriarchal culture, she is anxious about meeting social demands on the female body and afraid of being replaced. Rather than seeing the connection to her dark twin, Joan endeavors to project her monstrous desire onto her dark twin. A "normal" woman, according to what she has been taught, should be dependent, compliant rather than threatening. Joan's attempt to reject the unwanted and fearful part of the self, however, reinforces the existence of repressed desire and challenges the notion of a unified self. As

Joan finds that there is “no difference” between her dark twin and herself, this inability to distinguish between “what is me and what is not-me, what is real and what is imagined” (Day 22) shows that a space is opened up for doubles and split selves, which are not total opposites but dependent on each other. No matter how hard she tries, Joan fails to escape from the dark self within her mind.

Joan’s flight from the confines of her traumatic past and her own body drives her into the ultimate escape, death. While she fakes her suicide and flees from a blackmailer to Italy, Joan never succeeds in eluding her own life because she has to face “the return of the repressed” from time to time. As soon as she arrives in Terremoto, Italy, Joan not only buries her old clothes but also changes her appearance by cutting and dyeing her remarkably red hair. As time goes by, nevertheless, the “inanimate” clothes do not rest in peace but come to surface. Joan restlessly feels,

[b]elow me, in the foundations of the house, I could hear the clothes I’d buried there growing themselves a body. It was almost completed; it was digging itself out, like a huge blind mole, slowly and painfully shambling up the hill to the balcony... a creature composed of all the flesh that used to be mine and which must have gone somewhere. It would have no features, it would be smooth as a potato, pale as starch, it would look like a big thigh, it would have a face like a breast minus the nipple. (LO 388-9; ellipses in source)

The clothes embody the familiar characteristics of Joan’s previous self, a combination of blankness and obesity. When she was a fat girl, Joan was less attractive and noticeable because in the eyes of other people she is “a huge featureless blur” (LO 94). As a teenager, Joan also perceives herself as “a single enormous breast”(LO 114-5). The inanimate clothes are transformed into a familiar persona again, namely, the Fat Lady.

She rose into the air and descended on me as I lay stretched out in the chair. For a moment she hovered around me like ectoplasm, like a gelatin shell, my ghost, my

angel; then she settled and I was absorbed into her. Within my former body, I gasped for air. Disguised, concealed, white fur choking my nose and mouth. Obliterated. (LO 389)

As Freud claims, “[t]o some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all” (“The Uncanny” 244). Joan’s old clothes which represent her previous identities (a fat girl, an inept wife, a mistress, and a writer) obliterate the distinction between the past and the present, fantasy and reality. According to Joan’s description, a monstrous creature comes to life, crawls back to her, and tries to suffocate her inch by inch. This time, it is Joan who feels like being buried alive. An uncanny effect is easily produced “when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced” (“The Uncanny” 244). In *Lady Oracle*, we can identify various uncanny features, such as a compulsive behavior pattern (compulsion to repeat), a doubling and multiplying of characters, an animation of inanimate objects. All of these are bred by the subject’s unconscious fears, or more specifically, by what the subject represses. In other words, what is experienced as uncanny is the embodiment of Joan’s anxieties, transformed into concrete shapes external to herself.

Indeed, unspeakable and indelible fears constantly disturb Gothic heroines despite the fact that romantic love and heterosexual marriage as a happy ending prevail in most Gothic romances. The primary terror at the heart of the female Gothic tradition is the terror of male rejection or violence (Fee 63). In *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster portrays a Gothic heroine’s fears of men’s violence and rejection. Such fears also explain her ambivalence toward femininity, particularly, in terms of her body. Due to her obese body, she is seen as not “feminine” enough but this paradoxically protects her from being harrassed. Therefore, Joan confesses that she has never developed the usual female fears. Even Joan’s mother who warns her about bad men lurking in the dark does not believe that she would be molested. As Joan says, “[i]t would have been like molesting a giant basketball” (LO 166). While her fatness leads to male rejection, which is her mother’s main concern, her giant body simultaneously



gives her power to deal with men's violence: "I knew I would be able to squash any potential molester against a wall merely by breathing out" (LO 166). Nevertheless, Joan sometimes "secretly" feels eager to have "images of exuding melting femininity and soft surrender"(LO 166). After becoming slim and pretty, Joan feels restless so that she longs to be fat again. Joan's fat body strangely provides a sense of security because it is "an insulation, a cocoon and a disguise" (LO 167). Above all, a fat woman seems immune to the menacing gaze of men. Since she is too large to draw men's interest, she obtains invisibility. The only influence of her fat body which Joan wants is to "be merely an onlooker again, with nothing too much expected of me" mainly because "without my magic cloak of blubber and invisibility I felt naked, pruned, as though some essential covering was missing" (LO 167). In fact, whether fat or slender, the female body is inevitably the target of male gaze. While "normally" slim women may be whistled on the street, fat women can be a "spectacle," like the Fat Lady, on display in an exhibition.

In Gothic novels, a more deep-seated fear which the heroine harbors is that of loss of identity, a loss that can lead to madness or even death. Such a female fear reflects the situation of many married middle-class women who constitute the main readership of the Gothic genre. A respectable, innocent, and protected woman has to leave her family where her identity, however restricted, is comparatively secure. After she marries a qualified suitor, her husband, who takes the place of her father, is entitled to have sexual rights and absolute authority over her. Michelle Massé has coined the term "marital Gothic" to describe stories in which a recently married woman discovers with horror that her husband who should support her new identity and listen to her voice, in reality, fails to do so (20). Therefore, horror returns in the new home of the couple, conjured up by denial of the heroine's identity and autonomy. Atwood exploits familiar features from fairy tales to explore female fear of male indifference / violence and of loss of identity. Her revision of fairy tales simultaneously duplicates and undercuts gender myths and stereotypes.

## II. Fairy Tales

Gothic fiction is characterized by a specific collection of motifs and themes, many of which come through folklore, fairytales, and myths (Howells 63). Atwood's attempt to examine fairy tales within Gothic stories reveals the sexual politics embedded in society.

She comments on *Grimm's Fairy Tales* in her interview with Karla Hammond:

*Grimm's Fairy Tales* are just as much myth or story as anything else. But some get repeated so often in the society that they become definitive, i.e. myths of that society. [...] The unexpurgated *Grimm's Fairy Tales* contain a number of fairy tales in which women are not only the central characters but win by using their own intelligence. Some people feel fairy tales are bad for women. This is true if the only ones they're referring to are those tarted-up French versions of "Cinderella" and "Bluebeard," in which the female protagonist gets rescued by her brothers.

But in many of them, women rather than men have the magic powers. (Ingersoll 114-5)

While highlighting the self-destructive belief on women's passivity and dependence on men's salvation, Atwood also discusses her protagonist's potential of "magic powers." She appropriates "The Bluebeard" to critique male violence / social restriction imposed on female body and mind. In addition, She employs "The Little Mermaid" and "The Red Shoes" from Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales to examine her protagonist's fear of male indifference and of losing her identity.

### 1. The Bluebeard

The basic structure of the Bluebeard tale is similar to traditional Gothic romances. A wealthy, powerful man brings his young bride to his castle and forbids her to open a certain door. Out of curiosity, the bride insists on opening the door. As soon as she knows the secret behind the door, she dies. As usual, the heroine puts herself in danger but is unable to rescue herself. The villain's identity is revealed and next comes the true hero / rescuer.

The heroine survives and marries again, to her Mr. Right. The rule of a happy ending is important in fairy tales even though the Bluebeard tale begins with events surrounding a murderous husband and a marriage trap. It was not until 1697 that the tale received its clearest codification in Charles Perrault's fairy tale, "Barbe Bleue" (Grace 248). In Perrault's version, the terrified wife asks her sister Anne to "go up... upon the top of the tower, and see if my brothers are not coming" (Perrault 109). In the end, the helpless woman is saved by her brothers who kill the villain-husband. The woman then inherits her husband's wealth, rewards her brothers, and marries a good man. The final rescue, which restores the heroine to her place in the patriarchal structure by subsuming her to the hero in marriage, exposes the most fundamental source of violence in the story (Hite 154). That is, a society that defines all possible male-female relations in terms of masculine control, female vulnerability, and heterosexual marriage produces terror for women.

The Bluebeard tale alluded in *Lady Oracle* is the Grimms' "Fitcher's Bird" which has great influence on Atwood. Atwood admits that she loves the complete, unexpurgated *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, which she read at six, and that one of her favorite stories was "Fitcher's Bird" (Ingersoll 70-1). The Grimms' "Fitcher's Bird" is about a disguised wizard (sometimes Death or the devil) whose touch forces pretty girls to leap into his basket. When he takes them to his castle, he gives them an egg to be carried everywhere and keys to every room but one, which he forbids them to open. This is a test before marriage. Most versions of the tale have three sisters: the first two cannot resist curiosity and open the door, discovering the former brides' chopped-up bodies, and dropping their eggs in blood. As soon as the wizard sees the egg's indelible blood stains, the two sisters join the corpses. The third sister is curious but more clever. When she enters the door, she does not carry the egg, which will be the evidence of her disobedience and transgression. She passes the test, deceives the wizard, and finally gains power over him. In the Grimms' version, there is no rescuer for the sisters. In the end, the third sister puts her sisters' bodies together and

disguises herself as a bird to flee. This time, it is not the bride but the groom (the wizard) that dies in a communal execution.

In spite of its simple outline, the Bluebeard tale implies the complexity of sexual politics. The forbidden door embodies a prohibited space for women. They are asked to obey patriarchal rules and repress their curiosity. The prohibition prevents women from having knowledge or experience which may be dangerous but worth the risk of acquiring it. According to Anne Williams, “the Bluebeard’s secret is the foundation upon which patriarchal culture rests: control of the subversively curious female, personified in his wives” (41). A woman’s curiosity, or her desire for more knowledge beyond the domestic sphere threatens men and is regarded as social transgression. Furthermore, prohibition and female obedience in the Bluebeard tale shed light on the repression of sexuality in Gothic tales. For female characters, repression reveals either complete denial of sexuality and adoption of childish qualities or deep attraction to a powerful male figure, which is expressed as daughterly love and obedience. On the one hand, both Gothic romances and the Bluebeard tale reveal female masochistic identification and female fear of male violence. Hence, the Bluebeard plot embedded in most Gothic romances is likely to disturb female readers and stir up their discontent with their own situations. On the other hand, just as the horrors of transgression sometimes become a powerful means to reinforce the value or necessity of social restrictions, the reading experience may forestall the readers’ subversiveness. After all, female readers of Gothic romances can experience fear and desire by identifying Gothic heroines without risk and leaving the house.

Compared with the heroines in fairy tales, Joan does not consider herself self-reliant and admits that she is never the clever third sister in the fairy tale:

[I]n any labyrinth I would have let go of the thread in order to follow a wandering light, a fleeting voice. In a fairy tale I would be one of the two stupid 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. I told lies but they were not watertight. (LO182)

Represented as a strategic device for survival, deception is crucial for Joan to conceal socially unacceptable parts of her self in order to retain men's love. While dealing with male indifference, Joan inevitably fears a loss of identity connected to her uncontrollable doubling or reduplication (Fee 64). Therefore, Joan confesses that "I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many" (LO 298). In *Lady Oracle*, the notion of a coherent, unified self is called into question when Atwood highlights the protagonist's self division as well as her duplicity. According to the formula of the Bluebeard tale, Joan finally enters the labyrinth in her Gothic novel, *Stalked by Love*, and opens the door. In the center of the maze, she meets her multiple selves and recognizes her Gothic fantasies about men. After opening the door, she at first believes the only way out of the maze is through male rescue: "There, standing on the threshold, waiting for her, was Redmond [the Gothic hero]" (LO 415). First, Joan believes that he is her rescuer. Then she knows: "Redmond was the killer. He was a killer in disguise, he wanted to murder her as he had murdered his other wives.... He wanted to replace her with the other one, the next one, thin and flawless" (LO 415, ellipses in source). At this moment, Joan exhibits a typical women's fear of male violence as the bride realizes that her husband is a murderer. At the same time, she is afraid to be replaced because she is not "thin and flawless." This self-abasement results from her mental wound as a rejected child. In addition, the ending of *Stalked by Love* undermines Joan's oversimplified perception about men, or in Shuli Barzilai's word, her "Bluebeard Syndrome" (250). Joan witnesses the transformation of Redmond / Bluebeard. The distinction between rescuers and villains is ambiguous because Redmond's face in turn metamorphoses into the faces of the various men in Joan's life, including her father, the Polish Count, the Royal Porcupine, the villain from her poetry, and Arthur. Atwood successfully rewrites the Bluebeard tale

because when the wife opens the door, what she finds is that a man, just like herself, has multiple identities. Most importantly, when the man wants to rescue Joan and promises that they will dance together forever, she refuses. After telling the man “I know who you are” (415), Joan decides to dance alone and thus achieves self-deliverance. Although at first she identifies with the doomed wife in the Gothic, Joan ends up becoming the third sister in “Fitcher’s Bird” to rescue herself.

In many versions of the Bluebeard tale, the wives are beheaded and their bodies are the husband’s collections and trophies. Similarly, Joan’s body rarely belongs to herself. It is for her mother’s expectations, for her aunt’s condition (to get her money by losing one hundred pounds), and for her lovers’ and husband’s visual satisfaction or desire. What is more, Joan’s mental wounds separate her from her mother and even from part of herself. She fabricates a new life, creates different identities, and buries her past as well as all memories about her mother. In addition to the theme of self-deliverance in “Fitcher’s Bird,” Atwood also adopts the “re-membering” theme from this fairy tale. “Fitcher’s Bird” is about escaping from marital dismemberment and, in particular, physical dismemberment. In the end, the third sister rejoins the severed pieces of her sisters and disguises herself as a bird to flee. She succeeds in re-creating life and re-gaining freedom from a marriage trap. In *Lady Oracle*, the re-membering theme underscores Joan’s acceptance of her multiple identities and reconciles Joan with her mother. Joan’s story testifies to women’s recognition of their multiple identities and their rebirth by “re-membering (re-discovering), speaking, and dancing their own texts as well as the old stories” (Wilson 122). Despite the fact that Joan finally refuses to dance with the man, Atwood draws our attention to her female artist’s doubts about dancing alone by evoking the dancing figures in Andersen’s fairy tales.

## **2. The Red Shoes & The Little Mermaid**

Atwood’s appropriation of Andersen’s “The Red Shoes” and “The Little Mermaid”

reveals a female artist's dilemma between her artistic career and her desire for men's love.

The either / or choice encountered by women, particularly female artists, adds complexity to Atwood's Gothic novel. Andersen's "The Red Shoes" is a moralistic tale. The protagonist, Karen, is punished for her vanity and ingratitude. She forgets her Christian obligation to be humble. Ceaselessly dancing in red shoes becomes her punishment rather than a gift. Dancing is so painful for her that Karen eventually asks an executioner to cut off her legs. The tale shows the conflict between the girl's love for dance and the submissive piety demanded by a paramount patriarchal institution, the church. Karen's dancing, viewed as self-expression, defies the traditional notion of female decency and obedience. In folklore, dancing is often associated with enchantment, taboos, deception, captivity, and (especially for women) punishment (Wilson 121). The color red is associated with blood. Therefore, dancing in red shoes becomes a curse. Karen finally reconciles herself to sufficient piety and restricted mobility so that she can resist this curse. Her story indicates that the price of women's self-expression is "[b]lood, the elemental fluid, the juice of life, by-product of birth, prelude to death. The red badge of courage" (Atwood, *Dancing Girls* 191-2).

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan has doubts about the choice to fulfill woman's traditional roles or to realize her own dream after watching Moira Shearer's 1948 film "The Red Shoes." In the film, Moira Shearer plays a ballet dancer torn between her career and her husband. According to Sharon Rose Wilson, dancing as a ballerina is not only individualistic and self-expressive but also selfish and unfeminine because such dancing takes on implications beyond compliance to role-conditioning (129). In spite of her rebellious pursuit of art, the ballerina ultimately commits suicide by throwing herself in front of a train. Joan explains the reason why she adores the unfortunate ballerina: "not only did she have red hair and an entrancing pair of red satin slippers to match, she also had beautiful costumes, and *she suffered more than anyone*" (LO 93, italics mine). Joan not only has the same kind of red hair but, more importantly, easily identifies with the female character's life story full of

suffering and indecision. Moreover, the ballerina's story sheds light on Joan's pursuit of her artistic career. The ballerina at first represents a wish-fulfillment dream for Joan who "wanted to dance and be married to a handsome orchestra conductor, both at once" (LO 93-4). However, after she decides to "dance for no one but [herself]," she cuts her feet on broken glass in her balcony (LO 405). Her bloody feet look like "[t]he real red shoes," punished for dancing (LO 406). Then, Joan realizes the double bind of Moira Shearer's role in the film: she can dance (be artists, be free) or marry (be conventional) but she cannot do both.

In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood highlights "dancing" and "women's self-sacrifice" when she creates a female artist, Joan Foster, who often compares herself to the woman in red shoes and the Little Mermaid. For Atwood, the mermaid is an "archetypal victim / artist" who sacrifices her tongue in order to search for her true love (Rigney 9). She renounces her talent for singing in exchange for the prince's attention. However, the mermaid with human legs is incapable of walking or dancing well. As Atwood points out, "[i]f you want to be female, you'll have to have your tongue removed, like the Little Mermaid" (*Second Words* 225). In a sense, femininity is in conflict with creativity. The fact that Joan conceals her writing talent from her husband is not only due to her feeling of being torn between femininity and artistic creativity, but also because "secrecy" is a woman's way of coping with the fear of success. Her successful writing career becomes "a challenge to the male ego" (LO 326). As Joan's lover criticizes, she is "a threat" (LO 327). The concealment of her writing talent makes Joan gradually feel "something was missing" (LO 261-2). Although she succeeds in possessing an ideal female body, Joan perhaps loses her soul. She "just drifted around, singing vaguely, like the Little Mermaid in the Andersen fairy tale. [...] She'd become a dancer, though, with no tongue" (LO 262). When facing the dilemma between her artistic career and romantic love, Joan chooses love and marriage. She may not be aware that she is following her mother's expectations: first you get a pretty body, then you catch a man. Joan also confesses that she "had this unnatural fear that if you danced they'd



cut your feet off so you wouldn't be able to dance" (LO 405). She worries that even if she finally overcomes her fear and dances, "they cut your feet off" and "[t]he good man went away too, because you wanted to dance" (LO 405). To keep her marriage, Joan chooses a duplicitous life because she realizes that neither the Little Mermaid nor Moira Shearer "had been able to please the handsome prince; both of them had died. [...] Their mistake had been to go public" (LO 262). In order to survive, she decides to "do her dancing behind closed doors" (LO 262). Yet, Joan is not quite sure about her decision because she says, "[i]t was safer, but...." (LO 262, ellipses in source).

Her uncertainty looms in her writing processes and finally evokes her vision of a dancing Fat Lady:

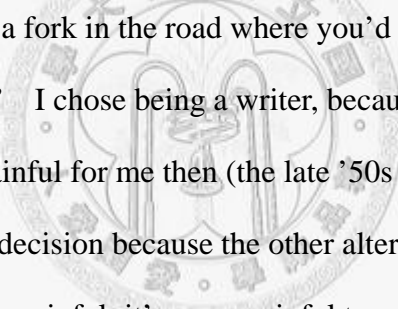
My old daydreams about the Fat Lady returned, only this time she'd be walking across her tightrope, in her pink tutu, and she'd fall, in slow motion, turning over and over on the way down.... Or she'd be dancing on a stage in her harem costume and her red slippers. But it wouldn't be a dance at all, it would be a striptease, she'd start taking off her clothes, while I watched, powerless to stop her. She'd wobble her hips, removing her veil, one after another, but no one would whistle, no one would yell *Take it off baby*. I tried to turn off these out-of-control fantasies, but couldn't, I had to watch them through to the end. (304-5, ellipses and italics in source)

Joan's obsession with the Fat Lady together with her anxiety about her body and her writing career not merely creates an uncanny and supernatural effect but also expresses Joan's conflicting desires for both men's attention and a career as a writer. Here the Fat Lady, who is dressed like Joan in her ballet recital in the past, transcends the time-space boundary and disturbs Joan's sense of self at present. Being a successful writer, Joan fears that she may become unattractive to men, just like a fat woman whose striptease is ridiculous rather than sexy. Moreover, since dancing is a metaphor for writing, Joan also worries about repeating

the failure in her ballet performance, particularly when she relies on writing to support herself economically and psychically. Atwood is concerned most specifically with the role of women as artists and with the price of art. As Joan describes it: “At every step I took, small pains shot through my feet. The Little Mermaid rides again... hobbling through the gauntlet of old women, who would make horns with their hands, tell the children to throw stones, wish me bad luck. What did they see? [...] A female monster, larger than life, larger than most life around here anyway” (LO 407). Unlike the original image of the sweet Little Mermaid in Andersen’s tale, Atwood’s female artist needs to break through the prescriptions of female roles and express her repressed desires, which are regarded as monstrous.

Regardless of the price, however, Atwood condemns her female artists to the choice of art.

As she states,



[y]ou would come to a fork in the road where you’d be forced to make a decision: “woman” or “writer.” I chose being a writer, because I was very determined, even though it was very painful for me then (the late ’50s and early ’60s), but I’m very glad that I made that decision because the other alternative would have been ultimately much more painful: it’s more painful to renounce your gifts or your direction in life than it is to renounce an individual. (Ingersoll 117)

Atwood shows, from “The Little Mermaid” and “The Red Shoes” (the film), that a woman is punished for wanting both to be an artist and to be loved. At the same time, she reminds us that to sacrifice art for love is, ironically, to sacrifice art, love, and the self as well.

Rewriting the famous fairy tales in *Lady Oracle*, Atwood successfully calls our attention to the differences within similarities. While no longer agreeing to amputation or, like Andersen’s Karen, depending upon a male angel to open the maze enclosing and excluding her, Joan opens the closed door by herself. Like Fitcher’s third bride in “Fitcher’s Bird,” Joan discovers that she is not a passive victim and that men, not necessarily Bluebeards, are also human and vulnerable. The Little Mermaid who renounces her voice for the prince’s

love finally loses her life. Joan instead survives. More importantly, she retrieves her voice so that like the Grimms' Robber Bride in "The Robber Bridegroom," she can tell her and her sisters' (mother's) story. Atwood utilizes many familiar elements from fairy tales, thereby aiding reader's recognition of the intertextuality of fairy tales. At the same time she wittingly defamiliarizes, transgresses, and often parodies these elements. This also makes Atwoodian Gothic "uncanny."

### III. Conclusion

Although *Lady Oracle* is a comic Gothic novel, its intent is serious. By incorporating Gothic conventions, its parodic humor exposes the myths and conventions of social construction of gender and shows how these are perpetuated in literature. In her poem "Hesitations outside the Door," Atwood writes, "[i]f we make stories for each other / about what is in the room / we will never have to go in" (*Selected Poems* 171). Unless we examine the truth / myth behind the door, women's lives still seem inescapably shaped by patriarchal forces lurking in Gothic texts.

## Chapter Two

### Trauma and Maternal Legacy

Writing in 1976, Adrienne Rich observed that, while there are detailed, often celebratory, accounts of attachments between mothers and sons, and fathers and daughters, “there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture” (237). Although the omission of mother-daughter narratives is starting to be remedied and the mother-daughter bond is being re-evaluated due to the writings of Rich and other theorists, most feminist writings and contemporary women writers’ fiction show their antagonistic attitudes towards the maternal figure. For example, R. D. Laing constructed a portrait of “the unhappy, insecure, cold, but possessive mother” whose smothering attentions are viewed as responsible for the daughter’s failure to achieve maturity and autonomy (Palmer 113). Inheriting such a hostile attitude, feminist writings in the 1960s and 1970s attacked the mother “as the tool of patriarchy,” indicating her role of socializer and upholder of the patriarchal status quo (Palmer 113). Likewise, Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976) also examines the theme of the mother as a monster and as the inculcator of restrictive codes of femininity. In her 1978 interview with Joyce Carol Oates, Atwood expressed her concern with the mother-daughter bond: “At the moment, and in my most recent poems, I seem to be less concerned about the relationships between men and women than I am about those among women (grandmother- mother- daughter, sisters) and those between cultures” (Ingersoll 69). In fact, Atwood not only deals with one facet of the ambivalent relationship between Joan and her mother but touches upon the daughter’s deeper attachment to her mother which is underestimated in a patriarchal society. In a sense, we are left with a view of women as pushed and pulled out of their original homoerotic intimacy [with the mother] into an ambivalent and very incomplete heterosexuality, where men may be the exclusive and primary erotic objects but are for the most part emotionally secondary to women (Palmer

114). Atwood's highlight of the mother-daughter relationship thus challenges constructions of heterosexual romance in Gothic novels. The mother-daughter plot in *Lady Oracle* serves as a "mirror plot" to disrupt the normality and acceptance of the surface plot of heterosexual romance and to question the surface's primacy as well as its patriarchal ideology (Becker, "Postmodern Feminine Horror Fiction" 76). Despite Joan's relationships with different men, including her father, husband, and lovers, Joan's mother is the dominant figure throughout the novel.

In this chapter, I argue that both Joan's traumatic experiences which continually disturb her in the present and her mother's gender inculcation cause her to fail to confront patriarchal conventions and instead to rely on self-fabricated fantasies through Gothic writings. First of all, I examine Joan's traumatic experiences in her childhood and adolescence which are related to her mother, Frances Delacourt. Then I discuss the maternal legacy given by Joan's mother. By discussing invisible gender inculcation passed down from generation to generation, this section is aimed at highlighting the intractability of women's internalization of the dominant but noxious concepts of patriarchal culture. Both Joan and Frances are subject to the destructive notions of ideal femininity prevalent in patriarchal culture as well as the Gothic.

## **I. Joan's Traumatic Experiences**

Trauma can be induced by an incident, a series of events, an accident, or long-term problems. Traumatic events make the subject unable to respond adequately or to take action immediately and cause long-lasting effects on the subject's psychical conditions, which are often accompanied by physical symptoms. Most of the time one's mental wounds lead to physical symptoms which serve as witness to trauma. In economic terms, trauma is defined by an influx of excitations beyond the subject's tolerance and capacity to master and work out psychically (Laplanche and Pontalis 465). Typical causes of trauma are abuse, violence, the

threat of either, or the witnessing of either, particularly in childhood. Catastrophic events, such as natural disasters and war, which cause a great number of casualties, traumatize both the survivors and the witnesses. Traumatic experiences can produce indelible effects on the human psyche and thus change the nature of an individual's memory, self-recognition, and the rest of his / her life. Despite the human capacity to survive and adapt, traumatic experiences can alter people's psychological, biological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experiences, spoiling an appreciation of the present (Vickroy 11-2). Trauma not only can be caused by external events but, more importantly, can be culturally induced by patriarchal conventions and social institutions. As Massé claims, "we must consider 'normal' feminine development as a form of culturally induced trauma" (7). Trauma narratives are implicit critiques of the ways social, economic, and political structures create and perpetuate trauma (Vickroy 4). Thus, when it comes to trauma, we should examine not only individual predicaments but also the intricate layers embedded in patriarchal systems.

In *Lady Oracle*, the traumatic kernel of Joan's life can be traced back to her ambivalent relationship with her mother, Frances Delacourt. Every time Joan recalls her traumatic experiences, her mother always plays an essential part in these unpleasant memories. After going through these traumatic events, Joan gradually develops psychic and somatic symptoms and is disturbed by nightmares. As Joan confesses, "I wanted to forget the past, but it refused to forget me; it waited for sleep, then cornered me" (LO 259). As a trauma survivor, however, Joan is unaware of the deep-seated problems behind the symptoms. Rather, she involuntarily repeats some of the behavior in order to avoid further pain. Joan is afflicted with repetition compulsion, which is defined as a trauma survivor's impotent attempt to dominate traumatic events by returning to the critical scene or reenacting the original experience. In other words, traumatized people deliberately place themselves in distressing situations and allow the recurrent intrusion of traumatic experience in order to get

provisional but illusory sense of control (Herman 41, Laplanche and Pontalis 78). In addition, the return of the traumatic experience through flashbacks and dreams in which traumatized people relive painful events can be attributed to repetition compulsion (Prete 9). The damage of trauma and the persistence of repressed desires entrap Joan within repetition compulsion that determines the entire course of her life.

### **1. Ballet Recital**

Joan experiences her mother's reprimands and betrayals from early childhood onward. At six, Joan aspired to play a "butterfly" dressed in the wings in Miss Flegg's ballet recital. However, Joan was too fat to play the butterfly. She is denied satisfaction and is later humiliated by her mother and her teacher simply because of her size. Traumatic events not merely bring the concurrent shame, doubt, or guilt, but destroy important beliefs in the subject's own safety or competence, and her view of herself as decent, strong and autonomous (Vickroy 23). The adults' views on this young girl indeed affect her self-esteem. Joan cannot help but feel that "[she] was grotesque. [...] [She] must have looked obscene, senile almost, indecent; it must have been like watching a decaying stripper" (LO 49) and that she was "a fat little girl who was more like a giant caterpillar than a butterfly" (LO 51). Later, she is forced to play the mothball. The suggestion is proposed by Miss Flegg who earns support from Joan's mother. In addition to the white teddy-bear costumes, Miss Flegg asks Joan to hang around her neck a large sign that says MOTHBALL. Besides feeling helpless, wounded, and desolate, Joan notes that "[t]he worst thing was that I still didn't understand quite why this was being done to me, this humiliation disguised as a privilege"(LO 54).

What is worse, Joan is deprived of the opportunity of experiencing a transformation from a fat girl to a lovely butterfly. Her wings are taken away and her dream is destroyed. In the mean time, Joan's potential creativity is inspired when she invents her individual

dance:

There were no steps to my dance, as I hadn't been taught any, so I made it up as I went along. I swung my arms, I bumped into the butterflies, I spun in circles and stamped my feet as hard as I could on the boards of the flimsy stage, until it shook. I threw myself into the part, *it was a dance of rage and destruction*, tears rolled down my cheeks behind the fur, the butterflies would die [...]. "This isn't me," I kept saying to myself, "they're making me do it"; yet even though I was concealed in the teddy-bear suit...I felt naked and exposed, as if this ridiculous dance was the truth about me and everyone could see it. (LO 54-5, italics mine)

While this dance immediately conveys her anger and makes her the central figure, Joan's pain is not at all alleviated. In fact, Joan's performance stirs nothing more than laughter and clapping from the male audience. The violence of the mothball-girl's dance causes "several people, who must have been fathers rather than mothers" to shout "Bravo mothball!" (LO 55). The applause from the men puzzles Joan because "some of them seemed to like [her] ugly, bulky suit better than the pretty ones of the others" (LO 55). In my opinion, Joan's first dance indeed shows that she is gifted and creative. However, she may not know how to exploit her talent. After all, she is deeply influenced by other people's views and by the ideas of conventional femininity. She even feels confused about her own value. This traumatic experience raises a question in her mind: "who would think of marrying a mothball? A question [her] mother put to [her] often, later, in other forms" (LO 55). For patriarchal society, it does not matter what Joan is. Instead, what is important is how much a woman is valued in the marriage market. The mother has been taught to think in this manner and she teaches her daughter to think in the same way.

When she grows up and recalls this event, Joan admits that she can now sympathize with Miss Flegg who must have wanted compliments on the recital rather than pity or suppressed smiles. Nevertheless, she can never forget her mother's betrayal because if her mother



“hadn’t interfered Miss Flegg would have noticed nothing” (LO 51). For Joan, it is always her mother who pays most attention to her fat body. Joan’s mother names her after the movie star, Joan Crawford, who is thin and beautiful. As a little fat girl, Joan seems unable to live up to her mother’s expectations. Hence, Joan admits that “this is one of the many things for which [her] mother never quite forgave [her]” (LO 45). When Joan finds that her mother stops taking pictures of her after Joan reaches the age of six, she believes that her mother gives up on her (LO 45). As Joan recalls, “[m]y mother’s version was that nobody *who looked like me* could ever accomplish anything” (97, italics mine). It implies that a woman’s appearance determines everything. Being fat goes against the mainstream standard of beauty and the idea of successful femininity. Joan knows that she “was being reproached, but [she is] still not sure what for” (LO 45). Atwood shows her critique of female beauty as a cultural practice and indicates that the absence of any alternative choices for women to identify with enforces oppressive norms. Moreover, owing to the humiliating experience in the ballet recital, Joan believes that she can never succeed in doing anything and fears being exposed in public. The impact of trauma is far-reaching because the tyranny of the past intrudes on the present and even the future. Joan’s first Fat Lady fantasy in her adolescence reveals that her self-confidence and identity are shattered:

[The Fat Lady] was wearing pink tights with spangles, a short fluffy pink skirt, satin ballet slippers and, on her head, a sparkling tiara. She carried a diminutive pink umbrella; this was a substitute for the wings which I longed to pin on her. [...] The crowd burst out laughing. They howled, pointed and jeered; they chanted insulting songs. But the Fat Lady, oblivious, began to walk carefully out onto the high wire... she was so enormously fat, how could she keep her balance, she would topple and fall. “She’ll be killed,” they whispered, for there was no safety net. (LO 119)

At first, Joan seems to project her own situation onto the Fat Lady. The latter is also

deprived of wings and faces public humiliation. The lack of a sense of safety and support from others leaves her living in fear because of an imminent and fatal end. Then the Fat Lady is given the face of Theresa, who is another fat girl at Joan's school and whom Joan calls "my despised fellow-sufferer." In this fantasy, Joan is not as awkward as she is in reality. Instead, she leads the Fat Lady who is even fatter than her to the safe side: "Step by step I took her across... the wire oscillated, she concentrated all her forces on this perilous crossing, for a fall meant death. [...] She would step to safety on the other side" (LO 119-20). Having been traumatized during her ballet performance, Joan wishes she could return to the critical moment of that incident in order to exert greater dominance. Since it is impossible to reverse time, like many traumatized people, Joan tends to repeat similar traumatic experiences while altering them to some degree.

Joan, like a typical trauma survivor, attempts to separate herself from the injured one who is unable to react immediately. Splitting is a common defense mechanism accompanying trauma, which helps traumatized people dissociate themselves from painful memories whereby they can occupy dual positions, both inside and outside their pasts (Vickroy 28). Judith Herman presents a precise description about splitting: "The person may feel as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing from outside her body, or as though the whole experience is a bad dream from which she will shortly awaken" (43). As a result of her splitting off from her emotional self-awareness, it is the Fat Lady / Theresa who suffers embarrassment, not Joan. Nevertheless, the effect of her defense mechanism is temporary. Though later she reduces her weight by one hundred pounds and rids herself of her grotesque shape, Joan is still haunted by the traumatic experiences related to the burden of her fatness. Hence, she believes that she has "the right shape" but "the wrong past" (LO 168).

## 2. The Brownies' Practical Joke

One of Joan's traumatic experiences is the Brownies' cruel trick. Joan's mother arranges her to join the Brownies with the other girls, Elizabeth, Marlene, and Lynne. Instead of taking care of Joan, they tie her to a post on the bridge across a ravine. To rationalize their behavior, her fellow Brownies claim that "their running off was a punishment, deserved by [Joan], for something [she] had done or hadn't done that day," but their excuses are cruel and ridiculous: "[Joan] hadn't stood straight enough, [her] tie was ruffled, [she] had dirty finger nails, [she] was fat"(LO 65). They leave her alone to face the lurking danger of a male exhibitionist. Because the Brownies are threatened by the possible appearance of the villain, they choose Joan as a scapegoat in exchange for their own security. They can become safe spectators if Joan is the only one who should deserve punishment from a dangerous man. Afterwards, a man shows up and unties Joan. However, this rescuer confuses Joan since he also looks like the exhibitionist who is called "the daffodil man" (LO 71). Before the man is taking Joan away, her mother suddenly runs toward them in rage. Out of anger and worry, she slaps Joan across her face. Her mother also uses this incident as an example of Joan's "fecklessness and general lack of wisdom" (LO71). As she says to Joan, "[y]ou were stupid to let the other girls fool you like that" (LO 71). Her reprimand means that Joan is responsible for putting herself in danger. In consequence, her mother's reaction inflicts more pain on Joan and this episode occurs time and again in Joan's nightmares:

I would be walking across the bridge and she [Frances] would be standing in the sunlight on the other side of it, talking to someone else, a man whose face I couldn't see. When I was halfway across, the bridge would start to collapse, as I'd always feared it would... it tilted over sideways and began to topple slowly into the ravine. [...] I called out to my mother, who could still have saved me, she could have run across quickly and reached out her hand, she could have pulled me

back with her to firm ground— But she didn't do this, she went on with her conversation, she didn't notice that anything unusual was happening. She didn't even hear me. (LO 73)

The central figure in the dream is her mother, rather than the Brownies, even though they conspire to play the practical joke on her. Joan hates the Brownies but blames her mother. For Joan, it is her mother who makes her go across the bridge with the Brownies. Her mother knows of the danger of the male exhibitionist but asks Joan to face it alone. Joan's resentment against her mother's cruelty makes her imagine the worst situation: "I would be taken away by him [the male exhibitionist], no trace of me would ever be found. Even my mother would be sorry" and Joan "once actually waited for him" (LO 66). Her bad dream manifests her attempt to dominate the traumatic scene, but she can never cross the bridge.

What is worse, Joan's mother cannot hear her call for help in the dream. Although in reality her mother eventually stops the daffodil man from taking Joan away, in the dream her mother fails to rescue her daughter "in time." The collapsing bridge implies the failure to close the gap between Joan and her mother. Joan will experience despair and anxiety time and again unless the bridge between her and her mother is rebuilt. Hence, Joan needs to establish communication with her mother.

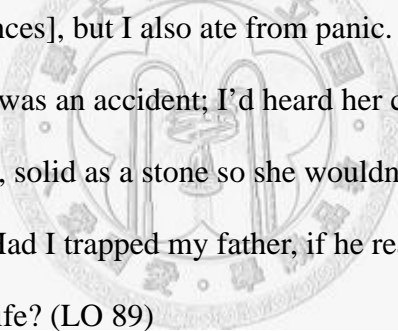
Joan is doomed to relive all her earlier struggles over autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy, even though her mother is dead, their war is finished, and public humiliation as well as practical jokes are over with now that she is an adult. Years later, Joan's unexpected encounter with Marlene, one of the Brownies, triggers a series of traumatic responses. Joan's first impression of adult Marlene is that "[she] hadn't changed that much, she was still a lot thinner than I was" (LO 277). All of a sudden, Joan, like her fastidious mother, turns critical of her own appearance: "My hair needed washing, my fingernails were dirty, my shoelaces felt untied, although I wasn't wearing any" (LO 277). Afterwards, she is overwhelmed by her past. She becomes the eight-year-old Brownie: "Wads of fat sprouted

on my thighs and shoulders, my belly bulged out like a Hubbard squash, a brown wool beret popped through my scalp, bloomers coated my panic-stricken loins. Tears swelled behind my eyes. Like a virus meeting an exhausted throat, my dormant past burst into rank life” (LO 277). Even though she tries hard to be a sophisticated grown-up, inside Joan there is always a little fat girl who is vulnerable and susceptible to people’s opinions, in particular, those of her childhood abuser. She can do nothing but run to a restaurant restroom, locking herself in a cubicle, feeling “helpless with self-pity, snorting and blowing [her] nose” (LO 278). The enemy / abuser living in her mind has not been defeated yet. Rather, she comes out from the past and corners Joan until she is “trapped again in the nightmare of [her] childhood, where [she] ran eternally after the others, the oblivious or scornful ones, hands outstretched, begging for a word of praise” (LO 278). In contrast to Joan’s instant retreat to her traumatic experience, Marlene, ironically, does not recognize Joan. Obviously, she has forgotten what she has done to Joan and easily leaves the past behind. The victimizer’s ignorance engenders the victim’s indignation because she is the only one suffering. As Joan points out, “[i]t seemed very unjust that an experience so humiliating to me hadn’t touched [Marlene] at all” (LO 280). Thus, while she feels almost overcome with shame, she is aware that “[she] hadn’t done anything shameful;” instead, Marlene “was the one who’d done it” (LO 278). Here Joan angrily poses a question asked by many trauma survivors: “Why then should I be the one to feel guilt, why should she go free? Hers was the freedom of the strong; my guilt was the guilt of those who lose, those who can be exposed, those who fail”(LO 278). This statement also pinpoints the power imbalance in the relationship between victimizers and victims. Though Joan, the loser, decides to fight back by telling Marlene that they knew each other before, the latter remembers little. Following Marlene’s reaction, Joan only plunges herself into more self-contempt. Being traumatized, Joan is tortured by self-denial, shame, anger and helplessness. All she can do is “suffer aggressively” in order to punish herself for her incompetence while accusing her victimizer at

the same time (Massé 256). For some traumatized people, (self-induced) suffering bears witness to their existence. The reason is simply because “I do it to prove I exist” (Herman 109).

### 3. Joan as an Accident

A significant traumatic episode occurs when Joan eavesdrops her parents’ conversation. She discovers that her mother had considered aborting her. Her mother blames her father who is a doctor for not helping her. After being called “an accident,” Joan’s existence immediately is called into question. This unbearable truth makes Joan feel abandoned, dispensable, and unworthy of being loved. She decides to ensure her existence by eating “steadily, doggedly, stubbornly” (LO 79). In addition, Joan confesses her deeper fear:



I ate to defy her [Frances], but I also ate from panic. Sometimes I was afraid I wasn’t really there, I was an accident; I’d heard her call me an accident. Did I want to become solid, solid as a stone so she wouldn’t be able to get rid of me? What had I done? Had I trapped my father, if he really was my father, had I ruined my mother’s life? (LO 89)

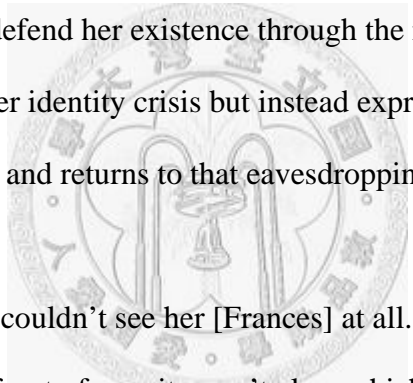
Several critics contend that Joan’s intentional obesity is an open rebellion against her mother and a patriarchal society (Hite 131-2, Sceats, Szalay 219-20, Worthington 285). I will add that Joan’s obese body seemingly defies her mother but actually is used to solicit her mother’s attention and love. In other words, what Joan really hungers for is her mother’s love, not food. Joan admits that there is a “war” between her and her mother and “the disputed territory was [her] body” (LO 79). To defend her existence, Joan counts on excessive eating to “swell visibly, relentlessly before her [mother’s] very eyes” (LO 79). She compares herself to “dough...advanced inch by inch towards her [mother] across the dining-room table, in this at least [Joan] was undefeated” (LO 79). Joan uses her body as a defense against the fear of nothingness within and a weapon in the struggle with her mother

who sees her daughter as an embodiment of the failure of her own essential femininity. In fact, the battle between Joan and her mother centers on cultural / maternal control and female identity. A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience (Wolf 187). As Susie Orbach argues, “[c]ompulsive eating becomes a way of expressing either side of this conflict. In overfeeding herself, the daughter may be trying to reject her mother’s role while at the same time reproaching the mother for inadequate nurturing; or she may be attempting to retain a sense of identity with her mother” (32). Although Joan persuades herself that she wants to “defeat” her mother, to prove that she is not her mother’s “puppet” (LO 102), her struggle exposes deeper needs for maternal love and care. No matter how feverishly she fights with her mother, it is sad for Joan to realize that their relationship is “professionalized” because “she [Frances] was to be the manager, the creator, the agent; I was to be the product. I suppose one of the most important things she wanted from me was gratitude. She wanted me to do well, but she wanted to be responsible for it” (LO 76). When Frances yells to Joan “[w]hat have I done to make you behave like this?” (LO 101), this is exactly the same question that Joan longs to ask her mother.

Besides eating excessively, Joan’s style of dress is another means to draw her mother’s attention and to challenge her ideas of successful femininity. More specifically, she challenges notions of the idealized female body: “The brighter the colors, the more rotund the effect, the more certain I was to buy. I wasn’t going to let myself diminished, neutralized, by a navy-blue polka-dot sack” (LO 101). For Joan, both overeating and exaggerated dress testify to her existence. Facing her mother’s complaints, Joan looks strong and determined. But, in actuality Joan’s strenuous engagement in the war with her mother manifests her vulnerability and helplessness. Traumatized people need a provisional sense of control which can be achieved through repetition and self-destructive behavior even though this control proves ineffective. For example, traumatized people may provoke an abuser into

action or provoke rejection so as not to suffer helplessly (Herman 109, Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 432). There is no intimacy in this relationship but hatred and conflict which recur “until later [Joan] was able to reduce [her mother] to tears, a triumph when [Joan] finally managed it” (LO 63). Unfortunately, Joan’s triumph is not real but an excuse she makes to protect herself and secure her rival’s attention. As time goes by, Joan’s anxiety and dissatisfaction turn into bitterness which cannot be alleviated by comfort eating. Before long, her mother’s verbal / spiritual abuse ends up physical violence in the kitchen. The conflict between Joan and Frances culminates in the last quarrel before Joan leaves home. Frances impulsively stabs her daughter’s arm with a paring knife. This not only leaves a wound on Joan’s arm but also deepens the gulf between Joan and her mother.

Even though she tries to defend her existence through the manifestation of her enormous body, Joan fails to cope with her identity crisis but instead expresses it in her dreams. She often dreams about her mother and returns to that eavesdropping scene filled with even darker images:



In the worst dream I couldn’t see her [Frances] at all. I would be hiding behind a door, or standing in front of one, it wasn’t clear which. [...] I’d been locked in, or out, but on the other side of the door I could hear voices. Sometimes there were a lot of voices, sometimes only two; they were talking about me, discussing me, and as I listened I would realize that something very bad was going to happen. I felt helpless, there was nothing I could do. In the dream I would back into the farthest corner of the cubicle and wedge myself in, press my arms against the walls, dig my heels against the floor. They wouldn’t be able to get me out. Then I would hear the footsteps, coming up the stairs and along the hall. (LO 258)

According to Margery Fee, this dream shows Joan’s refusal, “not just to grow up, but even to be born” (43). She is like a helpless fetus cowering in her mother’s womb yet frightens that her father is going to get her out. Her separation from the mother, in a sense, brings Joan an



unspeakable loss. Maternal coldness does not necessarily result in a loosening bond between mothers and daughters. Rather, the daughter may feel even more attached to the mother, eternally seeking love and tenderness from the mother or a mother-substitute while remaining immature and childish in her actions and relationships (Chodorow 135). In fact, Joan is unable to separate from her mother adequately. She has been oscillating between the attachment to her mother and the desire to live independently. Thus, Joan feels that she is locked in endless struggles with her mother. Her mother's impact on Joan is never-ending even after her mother dies.

#### **4. Her Mother's Death**

The classic female Gothic usually involves the heroine's separation from home and a more or less gradual understanding of the mother's situation (Modleski 68). Joan hardly meditates on her mother's circumstance until her mother unexpectedly passes away. Her mother's death brings Joan back to her past, makes her relapse into an eating binge immediately, and causes her writing to stop. Joan is incapable of handling such an unexpected and overwhelmingly tragic experience. The loss of her mother is unbearable, particularly when Joan is in fact attached deeply to her mother although she has hardly ever gotten affection from her. Rather than setting her free, this eternal separation from her mother plunges her into repeating an early habit— comfort eating and ransacking her mother's refrigerator. As Joan describes, "I went to her refrigerator, and gorged myself on the contents, eating with frantic haste and no enjoyment [...]. I kept expecting her [Frances] to materialize in the doorway with that disgusted, secretly pleased look I remembered so well— she liked to catch me in the act" (LO 214). Obviously, the bereaved daughter desires to return to the past when her mother was alive and able to behave as usual. Resorting to her old habits, Joan once again unconsciously renders herself as the little fat girl.

Joan's sense of guilt results from her involvement with Frances's death. She is

overcome by a wave of guilt because she had left her mother even though she seemed aware of her mother's unhappiness. Joan admits that "I felt as if I'd killed her myself, though this was impossible" (LO 214). Her mother dies from an accident; she drinks so much that she falls from the cellar stairs. Yet, a guilty feeling of imagined matricide besieges Joan, who later compares the dead mother to "a rotting albatross" hanging around her neck all the time (LO 258). Similarly, it is Joan's self-reproach and regret that generate her mother's spectral appearance, that is, her astral body. The very first response to her mother's death is the burden of guilt. Joan is preoccupied with her complicity with her father and patriarchal systems:

I knew that in my mother's view both I and my father had totally failed to justify her life the way she felt it should have been justified. She used to say that nobody appreciated her, and this was not paranoia. Nobody did appreciate her, even though she'd done the right thing, she had devoted her life to us, she had made her family her career as she had been told to do, and look at us: a sulky fat slob of a daughter and a husband who wouldn't talk to her. (LO 214-5)

Joan used to look upon her father and herself as companions using silence to protest against her mother's ill-treatment: "We had been silent conspirators all our lives, and now that the need for silence was removed, we couldn't think of anything to say to each other" (LO 218). Joan thought that "my mother was keeping us apart and if it weren't for her we could live happily" but the truth is that "[i]n fact she'd held us together" (LO 218). This is a critical moment for the daughter to discover her mother's great importance to the family and her sacrifices in her marriage. Especially when she looks at her mother's photographs in which she was young, pretty, and laughing gaily, Joan experiences her mother's anger and frustration because the marriage and motherhood "strand her in this house, this plastic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit" (LO 216).

Her mother's death puts a halt to Joan's writing of her Gothic stories for a while. Joan

starts to brood upon her mother's life and death. Even though she can stand in her mother's shoes to some degree, Joan's reaction to her mother's death is still negative. Her resentment against her mother now turns into remorse and self-hatred:

I was a throwback, the walking contradiction of her pretensions to status and elegance. But after all she was my mother, she must once have treated me as a child, though I could remember only glimpses, being held up by her to look at myself in the triple mirror when she'd brushed my hair, or being hugged by her in public, in the company of other mothers. (LO 217)

While focusing all her attention on her mother, Joan, despite herself, tries to find uncertain evidence in memories to justify her mother's love since the dead can never show her love.

In addition to her sudden but temporary relapse into an eating binge, it is even worse that Joan re-experiences her mother's (emotional) abandonment: "I'd been deserted, I was convinced of it now. I was miserable" (LO 219). Such feelings will accompany Joan until she engages herself in the quest for her dead mother, effecting reconciliation with her. The mother-daughter relationship is a significant locus of identity formation and perpetuation of traumatic legacies (Vickroy 10). Besides cultural preoccupations with physicality, a patriarchal society imposes invisible but indelible restrictions through mothers on daughters' minds.

## **II. Maternal Legacy**

### **1. Frances's Gender Inculcation**

I believe that Frances does love her daughter, but Joan always reminds her of what she has lost. That is, her unexpected pregnancy and the subsequent marriage not only terminate her happiness but also trap her in a meaningless life. Frances is stuck in a vicious cycle. The harder she tries to be an ideal woman (i.e. an obedient wife and a good mother), the more frustrated she feels. The more failure she experiences, the more desperately she wants to

meet the requests of hers. Frances tries to force Joan to be thin, but to no avail. However, after she knows that her daughter is determined to reduce weight, she tries to stop Joan by offering more food. As Joan says,

the only explanation I could think of for this behavior of hers was that making me thin was her last available project. She'd finished all the houses, there was nothing left for her to do, and she had counted on me to last her forever. I should have been delighted by her distress, but instead I was confused. I'd really believed that if I became thinner she would be pleased [...]. Instead she was frantic. (147)

Frances, on the one hand, does not want to lose Joan who is likely to live a life that she has never had. On the other hand, Frances's sudden and unreasonable change of behavior reveals a mother's innermost contradiction. She wants her daughter to be as "normal" as other women but at the same time is worried that her daughter may wind up in the same kind of difficult marriage as hers. Hence, she does not want Joan to leave home. After going through disillusionment in an unpleasant marriage, Frances refuses to believe in the happy ending of Gothic romances. Yet, she never shows her doubts about marriage and women's self-abnegation until she dies, whereupon she appears as an astral body and cries for understanding from Joan. In the conservative society of the 1950s and '60s being a "different" woman easily incurred reprimands. Joan has observed her mother's habit of decorating the living room. "My mother didn't want her living rooms to be different from everyone else's, or even very much better. She wanted them to be acceptable, the same as everybody else's" (LO 80). Moreover, it is a mother's obligation to help her daughter to adapt to society. When she believes that she helps Joan to live a normal life, Frances unwittingly becomes an accomplice of patriarchal society. Discussing women's internalization of social norms allows us to confront the mechanisms by which "the subject at times becomes enmeshed in collusion with forces that sustain her own oppression" (Bordo

167).

Frances avoids being a “different” woman in her time by fulfilling the notions of the proper. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément present the ideology of *le propre*, which means “proper, appropriate, and clean” (167). They argue that “[s]ince woman must care for bodily needs and instill the cultural values of cleanliness and propriety, she is deeply involved in what is *propre*, yet she is always somehow suspect, never quite *propre* herself” (167). Everything improper should be repressed and therefore learning self-control is an important lesson for Joan. According to Joan, Frances is “flint-eyed, distinct, never wavery or moist” (LO 63). The mother hardly reveals her own feelings; likewise, she cannot allow her daughter to do so. Frances only told her daughter to “act [her] age” when Joan was “a public sniveler” at the age of eight and “[her] feelings were easily hurt” (LO 62-3). What is more, the ideology of *le propre* impinges on women’s bodies. Becker observes that the treatment of food and dress are signs not only for a proper femininity but also for the control of women’s bodies (63). Susan Bordo, informed by Foucault’s writings on modern power, normalization, and surveillance, suggests that female bodies become docile bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, and “improvement” (166). Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, dress, and makeup, women come to regulate their bodies in relation to dominant social norms of femininity and focus on self-modification (Blood 54). As a result, Frances asks her daughter to control her appetite, to be as thin as the movie star, Joan Crawford. As a 1950s middle-class housewife, Frances is dressed properly in her “navy-blue suit with the white collar, her white gloves, hat and shoes [which were immaculate]” (LO 208).

Furthermore, Frances often asked Joan to watch her make up in front of a triple mirror when she was a little girl. This represents the mother’s inculcation of her daughter’s socially-constructed female image. As a matter of fact, this is also a process during which the unhappy mother forces herself to put on a smiling mask. When facing the triple mirror,

Frances “often frowned at herself, shaking her head as if she was dissatisfied” (LO 75). She may successfully create an ideal middle-class housewife’s appearance by making up; however, she loses something and buries her real self at the same time. Therefore, Joan discovers that “[i]nstead of making her happier, these sessions appeared to make her sadder, as if she saw behind or within the mirror some fleeting image she was unable to capture or duplicate; and when she was finished she was always a little cross” (LO 75). In addition, when Frances wants to imitate a fashionable image from a particular female star, she fails to keep her own unique quality: “Her lips were thin but she made a larger mouth with lipstick over and around them, like Bette Davis, which gave her a curious double mouth, the real one showing through the false one like a shadow” (LO 77). Admittedly, many women, like Frances, prefer meeting the social demands on ideal femininity to displaying their genuine selves.

I argue that the concealment of her real mouth signifies Frances’s unspeakable story and stifled voice. She tries her best to pretend that she has a happy marriage but to no avail. She has been trying to help her husband with his career. Yet, when she finally realizes that she is unimportant to her husband, she feels deeply rejected and loses the meaning of her life. Most important of all, Frances also feels betrayed by her husband and daughter when she does what a traditional wife / mother is requested to do. Without a goal, she just “stopped giving dinner parties and began drinking a little more heavily” (LO 84). That Frances draws a “fake” mouth and is seen “crying soundlessly” (LO 208) reveals her inability to voice for herself. Furthermore, as Kim Worthington contends, Frances’s “double mouth” suggests the double standards and duplicity demanded by patriarchal society, in which women’s conformity to the expectations of femininity usually generates the masking— making over— of women’s desires (295). In her dream, Joan watches her mother make up in front of the triple mirror and then confesses,

I suddenly realized that instead of three reflections she had three actual heads,

which rose from her toweled shoulders on three separate necks. This didn't frighten me, as it seemed merely a confirmation of something I'd always known; but outside the door there was a man, a man who was about to open the door and come in. If he saw, if he found out the truth about my mother, something terrible would happen, not only to my mother but to me. I wanted to jump up, run to the door, and stop him, but I couldn't [...]. As I grew older, this dream changed. Instead of wanting to stop the mysterious man, I would sit there wishing for him to enter. I wanted him to find out her secret, the secret that I alone knew: my mother was a monster. (LO 75-6)

The most direct message revealed in this dream is Joan's dissatisfaction with her mother who is more powerful than she is. In order to express her anxiety and protect herself, Joan transforms her mother into a monster who lacks human feelings and deserves such hatred and anger. Nevertheless, Joan's "matrophobia" involves a more complicated and ambivalent attitude toward her mother. It is much easier to hate and blame her mother than to understand her mother's frustration and situation. However, "where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely" (Rich 235). Joan does identify with her mother, although she refuses to admit that both of them hide certain inappropriate parts under the disguise of ideal femininity.

Joan's fear is not just aimed at her mother alone. Outside the door is a male stranger who is going to break in. In the mean time, Joan shares the same fear, with her mother in the dream, of being discovered by the unknown man. By delving into Joan's dream, we realize a subtler message, that is, she is more intimidated by the male gaze than by her monster-mother. Why does Joan want the man to divulge her mother's secret? On the surface, Joan wishes to punish her mother. In a profound sense, Joan's internalization of gender inculcation makes her release only in dreams her inner "monstrosity" which collide

with the ideology of ideal femininity. As a woman, Joan still feels sensitive to the gaze of patriarchal society. Frances's performance of making up also teaches Joan the art of self-concealment. If she wants to get rid of difficult situations, Joan learns from her mother the notion of constructing a new self which later becomes her favorite strategy. As Joan claims, "I knew all about escape, I was brought up on it" (LO 37). Frances sets a negative role model for her daughter because she does not confront difficulties but escapes and lapses into drinking. Although she attempts to be different from her mother, Joan unconsciously identifies with Frances, internalizes the myth of idealized femininity, and eventually chooses marriage as a guarantee of her worth but deals with her marital problems by escapism.

Frances fastidiously controls herself, expects rewards from her renunciation, and teaches her daughter to do so as well. Joan is deeply hurt by her mother but her situation calls our attention to the trauma of gender expectations. While trauma is often regarded as a specific incident with exterior causes, it can be a "situation that endures over time, shaping individual identity and ways of dealing with the environment" (Massé 15). Some gender expectations, such as women's slim bodies favored by the Western society, turn out to be maternal legacy as well as "legitimizing ideologies" that generate standards in people about what is normal, appropriate, and how they should act (Chodorow 35). For her mother and society, Joan's obesity is abnormal, improper and aggressive. More importantly, her obese body looks "grotesque" (LO 49) and represents her innermost desire which should be repressed. Joan has projected these physically and mentally inappropriate parts onto the maternal body, which is "a site of conflicting desires" (Becker 61). Particularly in the realm of femininity, where so much relies on women's seemingly willing acceptance of social norms and cultural practices, the conceptions of normalcy / propriety and deviancy / monstrosity should be called into question.

Frances also reinforces Joan's victim mentality. She is a victimizer rather than a victim in Joan's mind. The miserable mother does nothing to change her life but vents her



dissatisfaction on her daughter: “whatever [Joan] did accomplish was never the right thing” (LO 76). Joan can hardly sympathize with her mother but only thinks that,

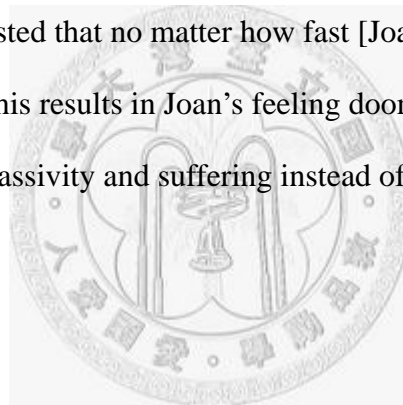
[p]erhaps she [Frances] wasn't aggressive or ambitious enough. If she'd ever decided what she really wanted to do and had gone out and done it, she wouldn't have seen me as a reproach to her, the embodiment of her own failure and depression, a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize. (LO 76)

This unhealthy interaction with her mother leads to Joan's insistence on her victimhood.

Joan considers herself an innocent and passive victim by blaming all the faults on her mother. She takes a victim's position by refusing to grow up and play the adult's role (Fee 57). In a sense, Joan does not learn to take her responsibility and cope with difficulties courageously. Her life can never be carefree and stable because of “the image of [her mother] that [Joan] carried for years, hanging from [her] neck like an iron locket” (LO 76). She not only gets haunted by her dead mother but also internalizes the conventional notions of femininity which her mother passes down.

In addition, Frances fosters Joan's Gothic thinking by promoting the primary values appreciated by Gothic stories, including women's self-sacrifice, self-restraint and belief in men's love as their reward. The Gothic heroine is supposed to give— not merely giving her love but also giving herself (up) physically, emotionally and psychologically. If she fails to earn the right man's love, she is the one to blame because it is she who has not given (in) enough. This dominant logic of Gothic fiction easily leads to women's acceptance of suffering and passivity. What is worse, women's internalization of this logic may end in a kind of masochism which is rooted in “the cultural, psychoanalytic, and fictional expectations that they *should* be masochistic if they are ‘normal’ women” (Massé 2, *italic original*). As a middle-class housewife, Frances instructs her daughter in lessons on femininity which are strikingly similar to conventional ideas of virtuous womanhood depicted in the submissive

heroines of Gothic novels (Szalay 219). Moreover, Frances divides men into only two categories: nice men who do things for women and bad men who do things to women. First, this simplistic division results in Joan's "sacrifice of complexity" (Rosowski 202). Joan reluctantly handles complicated situations but favors fictional simplicity. Thus, she is inclined to evade responsibility and take flight. Second, Frances implies that women are either good or bad. In other words, if men do bad things to women, it is women who are supposed to be responsible. For example, being repeatedly warned by her mother at every breakfast of dangers lurking in the ravine, Joan feels confused because "the way she [Frances] put it made me somehow responsible, as if I myself had planted the bushes in the ravine and concealed the bad men behind them, as if, should I be caught, it would be my own doing" (LO 58). Her mother "suggested that no matter how fast [Joan] ran [she] could never be able to get away"(LO 58). This results in Joan's feeling doomed. The logic of such thinking reinforces women's passivity and suffering instead of actively fighting for their own rights.



## **2. Joan's Gothic Romances**

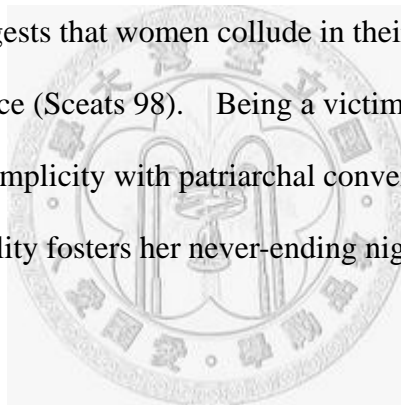
Joan's Gothic romances, which she writes under the pseudonym of Louisa K. Delacourt, serve as a product of her maternal legacy as well as a response to her trauma. While refusing to conform to her mother's requests, Joan's Gothic romances instead reinscribe romantic ideology and fictional constructs of femininity into which women are expected to fit. Joan tenaciously relies on self-fabricated fantasies which repeat the scenario of women's escape from evil people or dangerous circumstances, and being rescued in time. Joan felt insecure or even threatened in childhood. In her Gothic stories, the heroines vicariously expresses her repressed desires and fears. These pretty, slim, and innocent heroines are Joan's imaginative transformations, representing her fantasies of desirable femininity. Also, the description about female persecution and flight is the displacement of Joan's sense of

insecurity and her childhood experience. As Freud points out, “children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 35). Joan’s writing turns out to be an instance of repetition compulsion to reactivate her traumatic situation as if attempting to dominate it. She needs a sense of agency, even if illusory, to help her retain a sense of self (Vickroy 25). Joan is the “agent” in her fantasy world. Assuming the identity of Louisa K. Delacourt, she is no longer the passive young girl who cannot control her life. Instead, she writes her heroines’ stories, knowing before them when they are in danger and how they overcome difficulties. As the author, she can actively master her traumatic experience to seek for temporary comfort. For instance, the episode of the Brownies’ practical joke in her childhood is rewritten into typical Gothic plots. The innocent heroine who is in danger represents Joan. The three Brownies are transformed into the villainesses. The Gothic hero is often regarded as a villain before he reveals his true identity. For Joan, the daffodil man embodies the tricky identities of both villain and hero since he is seen as a threatening exhibitionist at first but then comes to rescue Joan in the end. As for Joan’s mother, she is usually reduced to an absent mother who rarely instructs or helps her daughter, or a wife who goes mad or dies in typical Gothic stories. In reality, Joan is traumatized by a practical joke. Yet, in her novels she knows what will happen and manages the heroine’s narrow escape every time. Joan’s novels simply follow conventional plots, duplicate gender stereotypes, and reinforce social restrictions on femininity. She is incapable of escaping from her old life and old self when her heroine successfully escapes and wins the hero’s heart. For Joan, behind her disguise of desirable femininity is her annoying, grotesque, fat body. Just as her mother simplistically divides men between good and bad, so Joan thinks that there are two kinds of people— fat or thin (LO 259). In her mind she always belongs to the fat group no matter how thin she becomes. Since she fails to delve into her traumatic relationship with

her mother who has her own story, Joan suffers from a sense of incompetence in her roles of daughter and woman.

### **III. Conclusion**

The discussion of Joan's traumatic experiences and her struggles with her mother also sheds light on the relationship between victimizers and victims. A victimizer could be a victim, and vice versa. Joan's mother is a good example. Frances falls victim to the myth of idealized femininity, but then turns to impose sufferings on her daughter. Moreover, we should never underestimate the perils of obsession with passive victimhood. Rejecting simplistic feminist views of the 1950s and 1960s characterized by male oppression of innocent women, Atwood suggests that women collude in their oppression through passivity and the assumption of innocence (Sceats 98). Being a victim, for Joan, is to evade her responsibility as well as her complicity with patriarchal conventions. Joan's reluctance to take action and to confront reality fosters her never-ending nightmares. After all, life cannot be safe and sound by evasion.



## Chapter Three

### Joan Foster's Underground Journeys: Writing and Self-Discovery

*Lady Oracle* depicts Joan's traumatic loss of her mother and portrays her quest for her mother as a process of mourning. Joan admits that she misses her mother's funeral and stops writing her Gothic novels for a while because "[t]he old plots no longer interested [her], and a new one wouldn't do" (LO 218). Obviously, Joan fails to deal with the tremendous pain brought by her mother's accidental death. The bereaved daughter's grief evokes her mother's astral body. As Roberta Rubenstein argues, "the presence of absence [absent mother]" testifies to the presence of unresolved mourning (112). In order to work out her pain psychically, Joan needs to conduct a work of mourning, which is "borne out by the lack of interest in the outside world which sets in with the loss of the object because all [her] energy seems to be monopolized by [her] pain and [her] memories" (Laplanche and Pontalis 485). The work of mourning is defined as an "intrapsychic process, occurring after the loss of a loved object, whereby the subject gradually manages to detach himself from this object" (Laplanche and Pontalis 485). Before this detachment can be brought about, and thus finally making new cathexes possible, a psychical task has to be carried out: "Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercatheted, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it" (Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" 245). In this sense, it has been said that the work of mourning consists in "killing death" (Laplanche and Pontalis 486). Yet, it is not the only way of describing the work of mourning. I argue that Joan's underground journey in search of her dead mother is not so much related to the idea of "killing death" as to that of "negotiating with the dead." According to Atwood, we need to "learn from the dead. [...] Because the dead control the past, they control the stories, and also certain kinds of truth — the 'truth untold' — so if you are going to indulge in narration, you'll have to deal, sooner or later,

with those from previous layers of time” (*Negotiating with the Dead* 178). In other words, Joan needs to negotiate with her mother and disclose her mother’s story if she wants to be set free from her traumatic past. Moreover, according to Carol P. Christ, women’s spiritual quests begin in an experience of nothingness (13). In addition to the loss of her mother, Joan’s experience of emptiness in her life also leads to her quest. “I had no soul,” as Joan says, “[i]t was true I had two lives [Joan Foster and Louisa K. Delacourt], but on off days I felt that neither of them was completely real” (LO 262). Negotiating with the dead simultaneously contributes to Joan’s resolution to unearth her multiple selves which are buried in the past. While her previous Gothic romances are regarded as an example of repetition compulsion to her trauma, Joan’s writing of “Lady Oracle” and *Stalked by Love* is a positive way of self-healing.

The process of creating “Lady Oracle” and *Stalked by Love* can be seen as the underground journeys into her unconscious. Atwood has discussed the significance of her use of the maze: “In Gothic tales the maze is just a scare device. You have an old mansion with winding passages and a monster at the center. But the maze I use is a descent into the underworld” (Ingersoll 47). Szalay regards Atwood’s maze as a symbol of “a psychological underworld,” a place where “one may face one’s wishes, concerns and fears in a form devoid of the distortions caused by the constant inner drive to fulfill cultural expectations” (225). When working on “Lady Oracle” and *Stalked by Love*, Joan is engaged in exploring her psychic maze during the underground journeys. The bereaved writer “must descend to where [her mother’s story is] kept” and at the same time “take[s] care not to be captured and held immobile by the past” (*Negotiating with the Dead* 178).

In this chapter, I discuss how Joan employs her artistic creativity to accomplish the quests for her dead mother and her buried past / selves. This chapter dwells on Atwood’s exploitation of Goddess myths (Demeter and Persephone, the Triple Goddess) and Alfred Tennyson’s “the Lady of Shalott.” I argue that Joan’s underground journeys through writing

not only lead her to reconciliation with her dead mother and her multiple selves but also compel her to confront her complicity with patriarchal discourse.

## **I. In Search of the Lost Mother**

While the absent mother is prevalent in traditional Gothic stories, Atwoodian Gothic fiction emphasizes the heroine's quest for her dead mother. Atwood frequently incorporates the theme of the rediscovered mother. There is always the necessity, in Atwood's work, to redefine the mother, to return to one's childhood home, and to explore the past in order to confront the present (Rigney 4). In the first underground journey when writing "Lady Oracle," Joan first rescues her mother from the voiceless dead, unearths the link between them, and finally comes to terms with her mother.

### **1. Unhappy Goddess in "Lady Oracle"**

Joan's quest for her dead mother is a reversal of the archetypal mother-daughter / Demeter-Persephone plot. In the Greek mythology, Persephone is the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of fertility and agriculture. While gathering flowers, Persephone is abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld. Demeter mourns ceaselessly for her lost child and all life withers and dies from her grief. Finally, at the command of Zeus, Persephone is allowed to spend half of each year with her mother (Zimmerman 200). In *Lady Oracle*, however, it is the daughter's task to harken to the mother's cry for understanding from the underworld. Joan gives a vivid picture of experiencing her first underground journey: "I was walking along a corridor, I was descending. [...] There was the sense of going along a narrow passage that led downward" (LO 266, 268). Further, this journey is triggered by "psychological necessity" (Howells 70). For Joan, writing Gothic romances or creating happy endings can never satisfy her imagination, alleviate her pain, or fill her innermost hollowness. Confronted with her writing blocks, Joan admits that she "need[s] to find

someone” (LO 266). She is convinced that she sees “someone in the mirror, or rather in the room, standing behind [her]” and that the person has “a message for [her]” (LO 267). It is her mother, transformed into the unhappy Goddess, who delivers the message: “At first the sentences centered around the same figure, the same woman. After a while I could almost see her: she lived under the earth somewhere, or inside something, a cave or a huge building; sometimes she was on a boat. She was enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power” (LO 269). The message is revealed in bizzare words, such as “iron,” “throat,” “knife,” and “heart” (LO 269). Joan, in the center of word puzzle, is unable to interpret these words, but Atwood’s readers can see their explicit connection with Joan’s mother who is considered as cold as “iron” and who once uses a “knife” to hurt Joan, breaking her “heart.” Her mother’s existence cannot be denied even though Joan tries to distance herself from the unhappy Goddess by saying that “certainly she had nothing to do with me. I wasn’t at all like that, I was happy” (LO 269). In accordance with the myth of Demeter and Persephone, a breach caused by separation and death is undone by the mother’s power to fulfill a mutual desire for connection (Hirsch 5). When the daughter sets forth on a psychological journey to rediscover her mother, the mother simultaneously calls her daughter, awakening in her a desire to know the untold story. Finally, the mother’s unhappiness is channeled through her daughter’s lines. As Joan says, “Lady Oracle” helps her “find the truth [and the] person that was waiting for [her]” (LO 268). Her mother, in a sense, is her muse to whom Joan owes her visionary poems.

The myth of Demeter and Persephone also represents the rebirth archetype. Persephone’s rebirth and the renewal of life depend on her return to her mother. Joan, like Persephone, surfaces from the underworld with new knowledge which allows her “to assume the role of artist, synonymous with seer” (Rigney 7). Returning from the negotiation with her dead mother, Joan creates a book which is not so “Gothic” as her previous novels. She confesses that



[o]n rereading, the book seemed quite peculiar. In fact, except for the diction, it seemed a lot like one of my standard Costume Gothics, but a Gothic gone wrong. It was upside-down somehow. There were the sufferings, the hero in the mask of a villain, the villain in the mask of a hero, the flights, the looming death, the sense of being imprisoned, but there was no happy ending, no true love. (LO 282)

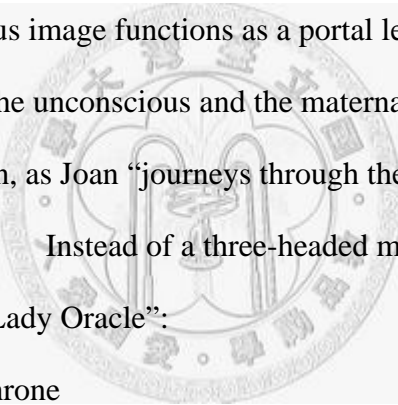
According to Gothic conventions, the heroines are supposed to suffer in exchange for men's love and protection in the setting of a heterosexual marriage. Joan unwittingly challenges the golden rules of Gothic romances, namely, true love and a happy ending. In a sense, she calls into question the reasons for the Gothic heroines' suffering. "Lady Oracle" is well received by feminists because the poems are thought to be about the struggle between the sexes in the guise of a sad story of an unhappy queen and her knight "who [is] evil... but it [is] hard to tell" (LO 269). This book is interpreted by Joan's reviewers as a furious comment on love and marriage: "Modern love and the sexual battle, dissected with a cutting edge and shocking honesty" (LO 283). Joan refuses to see this book as complaints about her own marriage; however, "Lady Oracle" does express her inner voice. As Joan recalls, her husband never knows that behind her "compassionate smile" is "a set of tightly clenched teeth, and behind that a legion of voices, crying, *What about me? What about my own pain? When is it my turn?*" (LO 107, italics original). Both an understanding of her mother's unhappiness and her assimilation of her mother's enormous power contribute to Joan's acknowledgement of her creativity and her first subversive rewriting of romance conventions.

I regard "Lady Oracle" as a turning point in Joan's writing career not only because it is significantly different from her previous Gothic novels but also because in writing it she is compelled to face the urgent need to deal with her traumatic relationship with her mother. In other words, she cannot escape listening to the (m)other's voice. As Cathy Caruth argues, "the voice of the other addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth which cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and

our language” (4). The truth about her mother is that she has her own story, her own wound. “Through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound,” Caruth suggests, Joan will understand that “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another” (8). Central to their reunion is the restoration of their speech and their mutual comfort in communication (Grace 38). Even though her mother is dead, Joan can change her life and repair their relationship.

## 2. The Triple Goddess

Joan writes “Lady Oracle” by conducting Automatic Writing, a process of writing while staring at the candle flame reflected in a triple mirror. The triple mirror which once reflected her mother’s monstrous image functions as a portal leading Joan into an underground place related to “the unconscious and the maternal” (Hite 161). The mirror becomes a means of exploration, as Joan “journeys through the looking glass to find her mother, her self” (Greene 181). Instead of a three-headed monster, Joan’s mother plays the role of the Triple Goddess in “Lady Oracle”:



She sits on the iron throne  
She is one and three  
The dark lady            the redgold lady  
the blank lady            oracle  
of blood, she who must be  
obeyed                    forever  
Her glass wings are gone  
She floats down the river  
singing her last song  
(LO 274)

Atwood, influenced by Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess*, is aware of the three-fold nature

of woman. As she observes in *Survival*,

Robert Graves divides Woman into three mythological categories or identities. First comes the elusive Diana or Maiden figure, the young girl; next the Venus figure, goddess of love, sex and fertility; then the Hecate figure, called by Graves the Crone, goddess of the underworld, who presides over death and has oracular powers. In Graves' mythology, the three phases together constitute the Triple Goddess, who is the Muse, the inspirer of poetry; she is also Nature, a goddess of cycles and seasons. (199)

Hecate, the most forbidding of the three, is only one phase of a cycle. In other words, she is not sinister when viewed as part of a process. She becomes threatening when she is seen as “the only alternative, as the whole of the range of possibilities for being female” (Atwood, *Survival* 199). Therefore, Joan's recognition of her mother's other “phases” terminates her hostility against the monster-mother. Moreover, the Hecate figure can be seen as the wise old woman who “controls death and rebirth” (Pratt 172). Coming from the dark underworld or her dark cave, Hecate is often depicted holding a torch and is given the epithet *phosphoros*, “bringer of light” (Hayes 11). Joan's mother, as the dark lady in charge of the secret of the underworld, brings their traumatic relationship to light and sheds light on the problems of Joan's writing and life. Drawing on the myth of the Triple Goddess, Atwood sees triplicity / multiplicity as essential to female identity because “the fully matured feminine personality comprehends all three elements and can bring any of them into play at any time” (Pratt 172).

The Triple Goddess actually corresponds to the three goddesses, Persephone-Demeter-Hecate. The Maiden and the Mother are but two phases of women's life cycle: the Maiden is the younger form of the Mother, holding within her the potential to become the Mother (Hayes 10). Without children, Joan does not literally become a mother. However, in the course of searching for her mother, Joan realizes that she is part of her mother and that her mother is part of herself. The link between Joan and her mother centers on women's

irreducibly multiple identities. Like her mother, Joan is also “one and three.” With remarkably red hair, Joan is “redgold” in appearance. She is “dark” in her sinister potential and “blank” in that “each side cancels the other out and leaves her unknown to herself” (Greene 182). Her psychological journey of searching for her mother is a quest for her identity. Furthermore, Joan no longer expresses fear or hatred but only sympathy for her mother. Differing from the horrible image of the monster-mother in her dream, in her poems, Joan’s mother, becomes immobile and powerless after losing her glass wings. This is related to Joan’s traumatic experience of being deprived of her wings in the ballet recital. In addition to her recognition of her mother’s existence and triplicity, Joan and her mother also share the fate of female entrapment and immobility.

### 3. The Lady of Shalott

Images of female entrapment and unhappiness appear in Joan’s poems and recall Alfred Tennyson’s “the Lady of Shalott,” who floats down a winding river in a boat and is ready to meet her death for transgressing the laws of her imprisonment. The Lady of Shalott is imprisoned in a tower, weaving her ornate tapestries, creating her art and watching the outside world through a mirror. Not until the reflection of a handsome knight appears does she leave the tower in search of love, only to encounter her death and little attention from the knight as she floats by in her death barge (Rigney 67). The irony of the poem is that “the Lady simply exchanges one kind of imprisonment for another; her presumed freedom is her death” (Barzilai 232). There seems to be no exit for the Lady of Shalott. Joan’s mother, Frances, acquires the tragic status of the Lady of Shalott. She is confined to the middle-class household, isolated from the public sphere of action. As a housewife, Frances devotes her creative and organizational energy to a series of home furnishing projects. Her over-decorated house, which can be seen as her art- / craft-work, turns into a “tower” instead of an exploration of the world. Tennyson’s “the Lady of Shalott,” despite its feudal setting,

reflects his own social order. That is, the Lady's isolation and gender define Shalott as a private, domestic domain which became increasingly important to the social structure of nineteenth-century England (Barzilai 236). In line with the idea of women's confinement to the private sphere, Atwood's *Lady Oracle* also exposes the predicament of the 1950s housewives, who live in a thick-walled "tower" on the outskirts of a town, remaining cut off from most useful social activities.

The loss of her mother motivates Joan to search for her mother. Joan realizes that her mother "had been the lady in the boat, the death barge, the tragic lady with flowing hair and stricken eyes, the lady in the tower. She couldn't stand the view from her window, life was her curse" (LO 399). Frances is "the lady in the tower" because she is confined in a middle-class housewife's house constructed by society, reinforced by her own conviction of women's traditional roles. The loss / emptiness in Frances's story derives not only from separation from her daughter but also from estrangement in the public sphere. The release from a disappointing marriage and meaningless life is a descent to death: "Down she came and found a boat. [...] And at the closing of the day / She loosed the chain, and down she lay" (Tennyson 123, 132-3). In this sense, it is partly correct that Joan suspects that her mother may commit suicide by falling from the cellar stairs or be murdered by her father. The central figure in "Lady Oracle" who displays female immobility and irreducible multiplicity reveals Joan's relation with her mother. Joan and her mother have been in the same boat all along (Barzilai 239).

Like Frances, Joan can be compared to the Lady of Shalott. At first, the teenage Joan is fascinated with the Lady of Shalott's female vulnerability and beauty. The unhappy end of Tennyson's poem does not deter Joan from wishing herself in the Lady's place: "I wanted castles and princesses, the Lady of Shalott floating down a winding river in a boat... which I studies in Grade Nine," says Joan, "I really wanted, then, to have someone, anyone, say that I had a lovely face, even if I had to turn into a corpse in a barge-bottom first" (LO 170-1).

Then the adult Joan experiences the Lady's struggle behind the romantic tragedy. Tennyson's poem concerns a woman who cannot both weave and love, and whose abandonment of her art for love ends in death. Joan also feels distressed at the dilemma between traditionally feminine roles and her writing career. She used to keep her husband's love by concealing her writing talent. After publishing "Lady Oracle" in the name of Joan Foster, their relationship becomes more and more intolerable. Joan finally escapes from her marriage. She depicts herself as the Lady of Shalott after running from Arthur's home to Italy. She is "the lady in the death boat:"

I'd been shoved into the ranks of those other unhappy ladies. [...] There I was, on the bottom of the death barge where I'd once longed to be, my name on the prow, winding my way down the river. Several of the articles drew morals: you could sing and dance or you could be happy, but not both. Maybe they were right, you could stay in the tower for years, weaving away, looking the mirror, but one glance out the window at real life and that was that. The curse, the doom. (LO 381)

The Lady of Shalott can be treated as "a woman / artist imprisoned in a tower of mythology which is of her own construction" (Rigney 9). As Szalay argues, Joan, like the Lady of Shalott, also weaves into her verbal web of Gothic romances whatever she experiences of the outside world reflected through the distorting mirror of her Gothic thinking (230). The mirror and the web signify the problematic relationships between art and life. Moreover, "the Lady of Shalott" creates a tension between conflicting desires to face and shun reality.

Direct confrontation with reality, though necessary, can be very dangerous. According to Roberta Sciff-Zamaro, "women in general, and women-artists in particular, seem to be prisoners of a patriarchal tradition which prevents them from expressing themselves, from creating" (36). Joan's (fake) death of drowning ensues as soon as she publishes her volume of visionary poems. The lines in "Lady Oracle" now look like her epitaph: Who is the one standing in the prow / Who is the one voyaging / under the sky's arch, under the earth's arch /

under the arch of arrows / in the death boat, why does she sing / She kneels, she is bent down / under the power /... / Under the water (LO 268). Joan used to deny any similarity between her mother and herself. Now she comes to realize that her mother's life and marriage were no less difficult than her own.

#### **4. Joan's Reconciliation with Her Mother**

Once she establishes communication with her mother, Joan realizes a crucial truth about her: "She'd never really let go of me because I had never let her go. It had been she standing behind me in the mirror, she was the one who was waiting around each turn, her voice whispered the words" (LO 399). Joan does not rediscover herself until she recognizes a reality for her mother and realizes that she herself maintains her mother's "unhappy power." Therefore, Joan confesses her love for her mother and, simultaneously, understands the importance of freedom for both her mother and herself: "She needed her freedom also; she had been my reflection too long" (LO 399). Joan succeeds in completing the work of mourning because her ego "confronted as it were with the question whether it shall share this fate [of the lost object], is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished" (Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" 255). This recognition not only sets free the spectral mother in her mind but also helps Joan achieve autonomy. Her trauma and guilt over her mother's death make Joan "dream about [her] mother, have nightmares about her [mother]" (LO 400). Thanks to her reconciliation with her mother, self-denial or meaningless sacrifice no longer rules her life. As Joan says, "I would never be able to make her [Frances] happy. Or anyone else. Maybe it was time for me to stop trying" (LO 400).

For Joan, the quest for self starts with a return to her relationship with her mother. By communicating with her mother, Joan learns to explore her capabilities and to appreciate her own value. The epiphanic encounter with her mother makes Joan realize that the source of

her frustration is to be found not in the outside world but in her inner world. She must “descend” into her psychic maze to unearth all secrets and unravel her life, which is as messy as “a rat’s nest of dangling threads and loose ends” (LO 357). “Lady Oracle” shows that Joan’s mother is the underlying cause of her writing. Although the dead mother has been physically absent, she has a far-reaching impact throughout Joan’s life. Whether she is simplified in Joan’s Gothic romances or is transformed in her poems, “the spectral existence of a dead-undead mother” whose power is archaic and all-encompassing signifies the obliterated past and old self which Joan cannot but confront (Kahane 336). Reconciliation with her mother is conducive to Joan’s introspection, which entails her reflection on her previous Gothic writing.

## **II. Multiple Selves in the Gothic Maze**

### **1. Joan’s Doubts about Gothic Romances and Identification with the Villainess**

In the process of writing *Stalked by Love*, Joan feels growing unease with Gothic conventions. She hesitates to kill her Gothic villainess, Felicia, who should be destroyed for the happy union between the hero and the heroine. Although Joan tries to write a conventional Gothic story, she finds it more and more difficult. She starts to have a different perspective on her characters:

Sympathy for Felicia was out of the question, it was against the rules, it would foul up the plot completely. I was experienced enough to know that.... she had to die. In my books all wives were eventually either mad or dead, or both. But what had she ever done to deserve it? How could I sacrifice her for the sake of Charlotte [the heroine]? I was getting tired of Charlotte, with her intact virtue and her tidy ways. Wearing her was like wearing a hair shirt, she made me itchy. [...] Even her terrors were too pure, her faceless murderers, her corridors, her mazes and forbidden doors. (LO 387)



Joan expresses several crucial reflections on her writing and life. First, the perfect woman does not exist. Joan wants Charlotte to “fall into a mud puddle, have menstrual cramps, sweat, burp, fart,” and Felicia to “los[e] more and more of her radiant beauty,” until she looks like a common woman in the real world (LO 384). In other words, she wants her female characters to experience what real women have experienced. In her previous Gothic romances, Joan reinscribes idealized models of femininity by “obliterating the defects of the real bodies of her readers and transforming them into beautiful romantic heroines” (Sceats 100). Until now, Joan rewrites the conventional Gothic plot to defy the ideology of *le propre*, the notion of proper femininity. The cultural value of cleanliness and propriety is radically called into question. Second, Joan begins to realize that the simplistic contrast between the heroine and the villainess is created, not by her, but by society. Such fictional constructs of ideal femininity excludes “otherness” and “difference” when women are put into the same role model (Becker 54). The heroine’s characteristics, such as innocence, beauty, tidiness, or virtue, represent her mother’s hopes for her. She has been secretly pleasing her mother by succeeding in becoming, if only in fantasy, the Gothic heroine who embodies the image of culturally desirable femininity from which both the mother and the daughter suffer. For Joan, to kill off Felicia is to kill off some part of herself that her mother and patriarchal culture consider unacceptable (Fee 72). Third, the conventional ending for the villainess implies that femme fatale’s threatening power should be suppressed in support of male authority and masculine control. Joan’s identification with the villainess and her awareness of her significance testify to her doubts about both gender construction and the Gothic genre.

Joan starts to identify with Felicia by providing her with similar appearance to herself, including red hair and a fat body. Most importantly, Joan shares her resistance to patriarchal order with Felicia by creating the imagery of excess. As Joan confesses, “my life meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. My

life had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror, which came from following the line of least resistance” (LO 3). Excess of her body and life becomes symbolic of female defiance against patriarchal society that wishes to constrict women to dimensions which are considered appropriate (Hite 132). In order to express a potentially liberating effect of such uncontrollable chaos, Joan makes Felicia release her threatening power to her husband, Redmond. As Joan writes, “[h]e’d become tired of the extravagance of Felicia: of her figure that spread like crabgrass, her hair that spread like fire, her mind that spread like cancer or pubic lice. ‘Contain yourself,’ he’d said to her, more than once, but she couldn’t contain herself, she raged over him like a plague, leaving him withered” (LO 386, italics original). Felicia is like Joan, being asked to discipline herself because “excess is deficiency,” a warning familiar to many women who have been schooled in the rigid requirements of femininity (Hite 147-8). As Joan continues to write, the parallels between her own situation and that of Felicia becomes increasingly evident. Felicia, like Joan, experiences a drowning accident: “*The shrubberies stirred and a figure stepped out from them, blocking [Redmond’s] path. It was an enormously fat woman dressed in a sopping-wet blue velvet gown. [...] Damp strands of red hair strangled down her bloated face like trickles of blood*” (LO 390-1, italics original). Furthermore, the boundary between Joan’s life and fiction collapses when Felicia says, “*You don’t want me. [...] You’re happier without me... and it was such an effort, Arthur, to get out of that water and come all this way, just to be with you again*” (LO 391, italics original). Joan appears to gradually lose control of her novel as it becomes increasingly hard to disentangle reality and fantasy.

Joan finally recognizes her conformity in her Gothic romances to the dictates not only of the genre but also of society. As she admits, “I’d sometimes talked about love and commitment, but the real romance of my life was that between Houdini and his ropes and locked trunk; entering the embrace of bondage, slithering out again. What else had I ever

done?” (LO 405). In spite of being a writer, Joan has never probed into her writings until now. She acknowledges that she uses art for escape to fantasy rather than to confront reality. Thus, she is “an escape artist” (LO 405). How does Joan stop being an escape artist? Instead of changing her appearance, the transformation should be made from within. That is, she must descend into “the maze” of her unconscious again and this time she will discover the truth about herself.

## 2. Descent into the Maze

Joan starts her second underground journey through her character, the rebellious Felicia.

*It was noon when she entered the maze. She was determined to penetrate its secret. [...] Suddenly she found herself in the central plot. A stone bench ran along one side, and on it were seated four women. Two of them looked a lot like her, with red hair and green eyes and small white teeth. The third was middle-aged, dressed in a strange garment that ended halfway up her calves, with a ratty piece of fur around her neck. The last was enormously fat. She was wearing a pair of pink tights and a short pink skirt covered with spangles. From her head sprouted two antennae, like a butterfly's, and a pair of obvious false wings was pinned to her back. (LO 413-4, italics original)*

At the center of the maze, Felicia-Joan confronts the totality of her identity constructed of her different selves. These four women are Joan Delacourt the little fat girl, Joan Foster the submissive wife, writer Joan alias Louisa K. Delacourt (a name she borrows from her aunt whose ratty piece of fur Joan retains in memory of her), and her shadowy twin, the Fat Lady. All are Lady Redmond because “every man has more than one wife. Sometimes all at once, sometimes one at a time, sometimes ones he doesn’t even know about” (LO 414). The various selves function as not merely the unconscious aspects of the split subject. Their revelation also explores how the exclusive category of Woman obliterates the multiple

dimensions within women. In the Gothic maze, the subject is treated as “a product of an unconscious always in process” (Rao 147). To subvert a patriarchal order, Atwood portrays a multiple subject-in-process to show her attempt to “take the capital W off Woman” (*Second Words* 227). By offering her different selves, the Gothic maze is not the locus of a static, coherent self. Here Joan can no longer deny her past and her other selves which are “defined by their situation in a variety of determining communities and relationships” (Worthington 299).

*Stalked by Love*, unlike Joan’s previous Gothic romances, does not reproduce the dominant discourse which favors certitude and unity. The truth at the center of the Gothic maze defies the conventional notion of a unified self and the restrictive myth of feminine roles. Confronting her past selves, Joan comes to terms with her own self-division, with the “otherness” within herself since this time she does not suppress one in favor of another but chooses to stay with the other four women. When one of Lady Redmonds mentions that “[w]e have all tried to go back. That was our mistake” (LO 414), Joan realizes that it is impossible to maintain a fixed, singular identity.

### 3. Joan’s Recognition

In the process of writing *Stalked by Love*, Joan also confronts her infatuation with victimhood and her complicity with patriarchal conventions. Joan has to relinquish her belief in timely escapes and men’s rescues, which can be a real danger. As a Gothic romance writer, Joan helps the male-dominant discourse train her readers to (mis)interpret some male behavior as loving and normal even when it is not. Joan’s complicity is related to her habit to romanticize women’s victimization and men’s rescue. As she writes in *Stalked by Love*, the hero, Redmond appears, uttering the typically heroic lines: “*Let me rescue you. We will dance together forever, always*” (LO 415, italics original). Although Felicia feels threatened by Redmond from time to time, she immediately responds to him:

“‘Always,’ she said, almost yielding. ‘Forever.’ Once she had wanted these words, she had waited all her life for someone to say them” (LO 415, italic original). Feminist critics have argued that Gothic novels appeal to female readers because they at first arouse women’s common fear of male violence and indifference, and then proceed to allay them by showing how the violence or indifference originates in love and has been misinterpreted (Fee 58,61). After expressing their suppressed fears in the Gothic world, women return to their daily lives as if nothing has happened, just like the Gothic heroine who is finally “brought safely into a social order which is reaffirmed at the end” (Kilgour 330). Moreover, passivity and acceptance of victimization allow the Gothic heroines to be rescued by the heroes, return to the conventional world, and establish themselves as wives and mothers (Day 17). With the happy ending, the heroine is reduced to an object of desire by achieving the demands of the hero and the society he represents.

In *Stalked by Love*, however, Joan’s recognition of her complicity drives her to rewrite the conventional ending. After Felicia rejects the hero’s rescue, “[t]he flesh fell away from [Redmond’s] face, revealing the skull behind it; he stepped towards her, reaching for her throat” (LO 415, italics original). The penetration of the Gothic hero’s appearance exposes “death’s immanent presence with love” (Becker 185). In other words, Joan is aware of containment, reduction and violence of romantic love. The image of death demonstrates that the final union with the hero embalms the heroine forever in the romantic plot and powerless victimhood. When she examines her own relationships with men, she discovers that “[l]ove was merely a tool. [...] I felt I’d never really loved anyone, not Paul, not Chuck the Royal Porcupine, not even Arthur. I’d polished them with my love and expected them to shine, brightly enough to return my own reflection, enhanced and sparkling” (LO 345). After resisting the lure of romantic relationships and the seduction of escapist fantasies which finally “turn into a trap” (LO 405), Joan can throw off her “calm and receptive” mask by confessing her own needs: “My ability to give was limited, I was not inexhaustible. I was

not serene, not really. I wanted things, for myself” (LO 308). As Szalay suggests, *Lady Oracle* is a female quest story in which the female protagonist is able to acquire not merely the knowledge she is seeking through cooperation with others but the realization that she is a part of a community (as opposed to the male plot which emphasizes the independence of the hero and the need to prove his superiority to others) (224). In writing “Lady Oracle” and *Stalked by Love*, Joan spiritually works with her dead mother and her multiple selves. The writing experiences make Joan transform, “emerge” with new understanding about herself, and decide to return to the community (Canada).

### III. Conclusion

“Lady Oracle” and *Stalked by Love* are written for Joan’s self-healing and regarded as compensation for the loss of her mother as well as her self. At the same time, her writing restores the mother-daughter bond and reconstructs her mother’s and her own stories. In “A Red Shirt,” the poem written for her daughter, Atwood writes, “mothers like worn gloves / wrinkled to the shapes of their lives, / passing the work from hand to hand, / mother to daughter, / a long thread of red blood, not yet broken” (*Selected Poems II* 48). Daughters can physically separate from their mothers while being emotionally attached to them. In addition, Joan realizes that the core value of writing is about truth, a means to knowledge and confrontation. According to Barbara Rigney, art is the magic power to cure, to comfort, and to transform (8). From Gothic romances, “Lady Oracle” to *Stalked by Love*, Joan’s writing bears witness to her traumatic memories, releases her from the destructive myth of victimized womanhood, and transforms her into a powerfully creative agent of the mother-daughter narrative.

## Conclusion

Then I'll tell you a story.

I'll tell you this story: the story of how you came to be here,  
sitting in my kitchen, listening to the story I've been telling you. [...]

What is it that I'll want from you? [...]

Only a listener, perhaps; only someone who will see me.

Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*

### I. Stepping out of the Door

It is worth noting that opening and passing through the door has important implications in *Lady Oracle*. In the first chapter, I have argued that Joan, like the Bluebeard's curious wife, finally relinquishes her "hesitation outside the door" and confronts her fear and imagination in the forbidden chamber. Her fear partly stems from her overuse of Gothic thinking. In the end of the novel, Atwood also reminds us that it is equally important to cope with reality and real people by going out of the self-built room, out of the door.

As she is writing the ending of *Stalked by Love*, Joan feels that a stranger is approaching to her. Facing this unknown (or self-imagined) threat outside her door, Joan originally wants to "pretend [she] wasn't there" or "wait and do nothing" as usual (LO 416). However, she decides to make a difference not merely in her last Gothic novel but also in her real life. She summons up her courage, opens the door, and faces the man who stands outside waiting for her. In *Stalked by Love*, Felicia refuses to throw herself into the hero's arms and chooses instead to stay with the other four women because "[as] long as she stayed on her side of the door she would be safe" (LO 415). Although Felicia retreats from the door, Joan goes through it. To pass through this door is a breakthrough for Joan. As Joan confesses, "[it] struck me that I'd spent too much of my life crouching behind closed doors, listening to the

voices on the other side [of the door]" (LO 413). To protect herself, Joan becomes a powerful woman who actively attacks her enemy. To her surprise, she knocks out the stranger, a male reporter. Realizing that the man is not the so-called villain, she admits that she is overwhelmed by her Gothic plot. When she determines to refuse to be a victim, Joan also needs to give up her old belief that she is powerless and thus she can do nothing to hurt anyone. As soon as she rejects this role, Joan assumes responsibility for her actions by taking care of the man in the hospital. Refusal to be a victim helps Joan expose her inner power and recognize her complicity with patriarchal society. Even though some feminists argue that women's powerlessness should be attributed to a patriarchal invention rather than their masochistic nature, Atwood insists that women share in the guilt of their victimization, namely, their cultural culpability. Being victims is not necessarily equal to doing anything with impunity. Women may ignore their responsibility and their ability to make changes when being victims.

On the other hand, a man in a bandage who is less intimidating and a female caretaker who wins his heart could be the material of a traditional Gothic ending. In her interview with Becker, Atwood comments on the ending of *Jane Eyre* and suggests, "I would say that *Jane Eyre* pattern is more or less how the Gothic has evolved...the heroine gets put through all these terrible things, and then there's the sell-out in the end because she marries the man. But I don't think it's that at all. I think it's lion-taming" (190). In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood parodically explores the theme of lion-taming by having the heroine exercise female power. Unfamiliar with the potential of her own destructiveness, Joan confesses that "[she] certainly didn't think [she] would knock [the stranger] out like that" (LO 417). Some critics see the ending as a return to the romance plots such as those of nurse novels written by Joan's first lover, the Polish Count (Fee 75, Szalay 232). According to them, it remains doubtful if Joan succeeds in freeing herself from translating life into fictional clichés. Joan seems to find some chemistry between the man and herself: "I have to admit that there is something about a



man in a bandage.... Also I've begun to feel he's the only person who knows anything about me. Maybe because I've never hit anyone else with a bottle, so [sic] they never got to see that part of me. Neither did I, come to think of it" (LO 419, ellipses in source). Instead of agreeing with those critics, I would like to put emphasis on Joan's new self-perception rather than on her new relationship. Joan realizes that death is not the answer to her chaotic life and what she has escaped is not dangerous men but herself. After meditating on her past life and negotiating with her dead mother, Joan comes to accept who she really is. What she does is not get rid of her multiple identities but face them, accepting them as part of herself. In other words, she is more comfortable with her "untidiness" which used to be considered a weakness: "I kept thinking I should learn some lesson from all of this, as my mother would have said. [...] It did make a mess; but then, I don't think I'll ever be a very tidy person" (LO 419).

Although Joan's progress is only "three quarters of an inch," according to Atwood (Ingersoll 25), this tiny movement represents a major step in Joan's life. In light of Atwood's four victim positions,<sup>1</sup> Joan has struggled from the second position to the third. In the second position, one acknowledges the fact that she is a victim but attributes the reasons to the external factors, such as the fate, the will of God, the dictates of biology, or other social restrictions. Since it is not her personal fault, she can neither be blamed for her position nor be expected to do anything about it. As Atwood notes, in this position, "the explanation *displaces* the cause from the real source of oppression to something else" and "because the fake cause is so vast, nebulous and unchangeable, you are permanently excused from changing it, *and also* from deciding how much of your situation is unchangeable, how much can be changed, and how much is caused by habit or tradition, or your own need to be a

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<sup>1</sup> Atwood discusses four basic victim positions in *Survival* (36-9). Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim. Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology, the necessity decreed by History, Or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other larger general powerful idea. Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable. Position Four: To be a creative non-victim.

victim” (*Survival* 37, italics original). *Lady Oracle* depicts how Joan spends most of her life struggling in this position and examines the psychological need and influence of being a victim for a woman. In the concluding chapter, Joan arrives in the third position, that is, “to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable” (*Survival* 37). To put it differently, Joan can now distinguish between the perception of self as an innocent victim which leads her to more self-victimization, and the problematic circumstances which make her a victim. Moreover, she can probably go further and decide how much of the circumstances can be changed if she makes efforts. To open the door and face the stranger gives Joan an opportunity to quit the maiden-in-flight plot, recognize the potential of her strength, and break new ground in her life.

## II. Becoming a Storyteller

Joan used to be a clandestine writer. After reconciling and re-communicating with her mother as well as her previous selves, Joan discovers her inner voice and tells her life story to the male reporter. She gains the power of speech by acting on her own account, breaking the silence by telling her life story, and transforming her Gothic fears into positive creativity (Ljungberg 134). Since storytelling is a tool for Joan to develop an understanding of and relationship to the real world, self-revelation of her traumatic experiences and concealed multiple identities can be related to the concept of talking cure. According to Barzilai, Joan defies the trope of woman as passive object, as blank page, canvas, or landscape made for inscription by others and becomes a speaking subject by using the reporter as an auditory receptacle (267). It is of great importance for Joan to tell her own story instead of reproducing similar stories based on Gothic conventions or listening to other people while hiding her perspectives. Joan used / pretended to be a good listener. As a teenager, she played Miss Personality willing to listen to her girl friends’ stories “despite the temptation to tell everything, to reveal [herself] as the duplicitous monster” (LO 110). When she talks

with her husband, Joan neither discusses nor communicates, but instead is shown “mostly nodding” (LO 203). Before she starts her quest for identity, Joan admits that her voice “would sound false, even to [herself]” and that she always “found other people’s versions of reality very influential” (LO 193). By telling her own story, Joan reveals her resistance to the Gothic plot and her transformation from silence to speech, from an inept wife to an independent agent. It is essential to recognize that the power Joan gains does not inhere in social or political positions but derives from self-authorization and self-assertion. Thus, finding a voice for her story is her survival strategy.

In telling her life story, Joan exerts control over her text. The question of textual authority is related to the role of Atwood’s most female protagonists as Scheherazades or tricksters narrating their stories to win over hostile listeners. For them, telling the story is a way to explore alternatives, to discover how to live, and to bear political witness (Stein 7). While telling her story to the reporter, Joan simultaneously acknowledges, “the odd thing is that I didn’t tell any lies. *Well, not very many*” (LO 417, italics mine). The emphasis on telling some lies suggests that the entire narrative is mediated or processed by the female storyteller before it is penned down by the male reporter. Moreover, the lies within her story raise the question about a single version of the truth as the definitive one. As Atwood’s poem warns: “The true story is vicious / and multiple and untrue” (*Selected Poems II*, 57-9). The reporter seeks to know Joan’s reason for fake death. Although he gets Joan’s life story, this version is still not, or can never be, complete since Joan only reveals what she desires to say while simultaneously refusing to be pinned down.

In the end, Joan gives up writing Gothic romances. “I won’t write any more Costume Gothics, though; I think they were bad for me. But maybe I’ll try some science fiction. The future doesn’t appeal to me as much as the past, but I’m sure *it’s better for you*” (LO 418, italics mine). Realizing the impact of Gothic fantasies on herself, Joan is also aware of the influence of a writer on her readers. What Joan and her female readers need is not a hero

but a society that offers a variety of perspectives on gender relations and roles. Joan perhaps can create a better vision in her science fiction. Yet, will her new novels become less romantic or is science fiction another form of escape literature? The answers remain ambiguous.

### III. Atwood's Ambiguous / Open Ending

*Lady Oracle* is not intended to be a “tidy” novel. Atwood is reluctant to provide her readers with a neat happy ending. Instead, she highlights the openness of her novels in order to remind us that stories are always ambiguous and subject to interpretation. Her novels are characterized by their refusals to conform to any final authority, particularly because their open endings resist conclusiveness, offering instead hesitation, absence or silence while hovering on the verge of new possibilities (Howells 10). In addition, lack of closure poses a challenge to the readers. “The movement towards closure ensures the reinstatement of order, sometimes a new order, sometimes the old restored, but always intelligible because familiar” (Rao xix). In *Lady Oracle*, any attempt at a resolution, good or bad, may make us caught in the Gothic patterns.

*Lady Oracle* also deconstructs the stereotypical Gothic romance plot by providing an open-ended conclusion. In so doing, Atwood shows a contrast between the reassuringly neat resolution of the romance fantasies in Joan's novels and the complicated, unresolved predicaments in Joan's life. After all, real life, unlike fantasy, does not have an easy answer. Many critics point out that Joan certainly has not achieved the position of “a creative non-victim” (*Survival* 38). I would add as well that it is Atwood's purpose to show the intractable relationship between personal struggles and social conventions: “In an oppressed society, of course, you can't become an ex-victim— insofar as you are connected with your society— until the entire society's position has been changed” (*Survival* 38). Atwood highlights the necessity of both personal defiance and collective awareness. Joan is only

one representative of the millions of women under the influence of Gothic thinking. Without support from society, she may hardly overcome the deceptive ideals and unrealistic expectations she has internalized in the process of gender socialization. It is equally important to make a series of revisions of culturally based concepts about gender and selfhood. Despite the lack of remarkable progress, Joan is able to deal with her traumatic past, confront her messy present, and look into the future. In the end, Joan makes up her mind to return to Canada and face what she avoids handling. As Atwood writes in *Survival*, “having bleak ground under your feet is better than having no ground at all. Any map is better than no map as long as it is accurate, and knowing your starting points and your frame of reference is better than being suspended in a void”(246). If the beginning of *Lady Oracle* portrays the protagonist as the deceased, the ending can be viewed as a starting point of Joan’s new life.

Atwood is concerned with the psychological and physical survival of women. Whereas the traditional endings of Gothic heroines, such as escape into madness or death, indicate the refusal to restore the female subject to the symbolic order, Atwood keeps exploring women’s lives and gender issues in the symbolic order through her provocative engagement with literary conventions and real problems of contemporary society.

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