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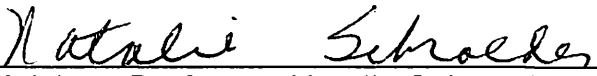
THE BONDS THEY FORM: AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIPS IN
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *LADY ORACLE*, *CAT'S EYE* AND *THE ROBBER
BRIDE*

by
Kimberly DeBrock

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial
fulfillment of the requirement of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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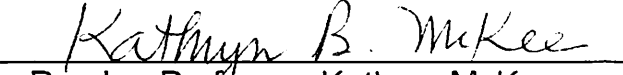
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INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood is a respected Canadian writer known for her novels, poetry, and short stories. Though Atwood frequently declines to comment on the subject, the autobiographical nature of many of her novels cannot be overlooked, especially in *Cat's Eye*. She was born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada as the second of three children. Her father was a zoologist and her mother a dietician. She spent much of her childhood in the backwoods of Northern Quebec due to her father's research in forest entomology. Because her family was frequently on the move, she did not complete a full year of school until grade eight. Her early childhood, especially regarding her father and the family's nomadic nature, is strongly reflected in Elaine's childhood in *Cat's Eye*.

Atwood was, however, an avid reader of such items as classic literature, Grimm's Fairy Tales and Canadian animal stories. At the age of sixteen Atwood began writing. She received a bachelor's degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and a master's degree from Radcliffe College. She divorced her first husband in 1973 and married her second and current husband soon after. She has one daughter and two step-sons. After living elsewhere for some time, she returned to her native Toronto permanently in 1980. This is also reminiscent of the character Elaine in that she too returned to Toronto as an adult and suffered a divorce followed by a second marriage.

Throughout her thirty-five years of writing, Atwood has received numerous awards and honorary degrees. She has authored more than thirty-five volumes of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. She is best known for her novels *The Edible Woman* (1970), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1983), *The Robber Bride* (1994), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Blind Assassin* (2000). Her work has focused on a wide range of subjects including "Canadian national identity, Canada's relations with the United States and Europe, human rights issues, environmental issues, the Canadian wilderness, the social myths of femininity, representations of women's bodies in art, women's social and economic exploitation, as well as women's relations with each other and with men" (Howells 163). Atwood has been said to have an "uncanny knack for writing books that anticipate the preoccupations of the public" (Website). She is critically acclaimed for "portraying both personal problems and those of universal concern" (Website). Her work has been published in dozens of languages including Farsi, Japanese, Turkish, Finnish and Korean.

While many literary critics have dealt with Atwood's work, the three books analyzed in this paper are generally not assembled and reviewed in this particular way. Critics often focus on Atwood's status as a feminist writer, due in part to the majority of female characters in her work. Carol Christ, author of "Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision," calls Atwood's depiction of feminism "a challenge, not only to traditional social and political structures, but also to the perception of reality which underlies and legitimates them" (Christ 318). Another popular focus is Atwood's fusion of

science and science fiction into her work. June Deery wrote the critical analysis "Science for Feminists: Margaret Atwood's Body of Knowledge." Deery asserts that although "science is not Atwood's central concern, she does suggest, albeit in a light and at times whimsical fashion, that modern physics is suited to describing women's experiences" (Deery 470). Deery cites both *The Robber Bride* and *Cat's Eye* as examples of novels which utilize scientific reasoning to depict the female experience.

This paper will focus on women's relationships with their childhoods, men, and other women. Though Atwood has authored dozens of novels and short stories, this analysis will use the novels *Cat's Eye*, *Lady Oracle* and *The Robber Bride* to explore various relationships women experience.

Written in 1988, *Cat's Eye* is about a successful painter, Elaine Risley, returning to her hometown of Toronto for a retrospective of her art. The novel unfolds from World War II to the late 1980's and gives the reader a glimpse into many cultural elements of the times, including feminism and the modern art movement. The trip reopens childhood painful wounds and causes her to vividly reflect on difficult childhood and teenage experiences. Her strongest memories are of Cordelia, the leader of a trio of girls who treated Elaine very badly. Atwood herself once described Cordelia as a young girl who "really got around, and she had a profound influence on how the little girls who got run over by her were able to respond to other women when they grew up" (Ingersoll 236). Through revisiting the difficult memories, Elaine discovers Cordelia's cruelty has had a

continued impact on her world and perceptions of relationships and that she must reconcile her past in order to move on with her life.

Lady Oracle was written in 1976 about Joan Foster, a novelist, who has a penchant for running away from difficult and uncomfortable situations. She devises lies and even multiple lives to conceal childhood secrets. The novel itself alternates between flashbacks and scenes from the present. Through the flashbacks, the reader sees Joan as an overweight child whose mother viciously criticizes her, and later, hiding her career as a gothic novelist, her past as mistress of a Polish Count, and her affair with an eccentric artist called the Royal Porcupine from her husband Arthur. In the scenes from the present, Joan has recently published highly successful feminist poetry and becomes overwhelmed by her sudden success and notoriety. After receiving a blackmail threat, Joan becomes panicked at the thought of having her desperately kept secrets revealed to the world. With the help of two friends, Joan fakes her own death and flees to Italy.

The Robber Bride is a novel set in Toronto about three friends who learn to depend on one another in trying times. Roz, Tony and Charis are connected to one another by Zenia, a manipulative woman who systematically introduces herself into each woman's life and destroys that which is most important to them. Each woman is deeply scarred by her childhood and Zenia exploits the resulting needs and desires. Through present events and flashbacks, the reader learns how the friendships developed and how important those ties are to the women.

Although the three novels may initially appear different, they are all similar in one essential way: they depict how the reactions to and perceptions of women's experiences are influenced by various relationships. The novels employ flashbacks and story-telling to familiarize the reader with the protagonist's childhood. Atwood states, "childhood is very intense, because children can't imagine a future. They can't imagine pain being over" (Ingersoll 237). It is this intense re-telling of childhood experiences that connects the reader so strongly to the characters and their current situations.

Atwood takes a well-rounded approach in her depiction of women in her novels. She stated in an interview that society has a "tendency to think that the only relationships of importance to women are their dealing with men (parents, boyfriends, husbands, God) or babies" (Ingersoll 236). While the novels do incorporate relationships with men, they also deal with a multitude of other relationships that women experience. Other women play a very large part in the lives of the female characters, specifically as young girls. The three novels delve into the secret world of little girls and the malicious games they play with one another. Atwood wondered if she would be criticized for writing about "trivial" little girls (Ingersoll). However, her incorporation of childhood experiences with adult difficulties has proven effective in developing female characters the reader understands and can relate to.

CHAPTER I: RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDHOOD

Throughout *Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, and *Lady Oracle*, the main characters' childhoods play a vital role in developing and understanding the character and their responses to events. All the female characters experience events in their respective childhoods that remain with them into adulthood and shape subsequent feelings and motives. They are plagued by events such as painful friendships, absent or abusive mothers, and morbid obesity. The effects of these childhood events can be found throughout the women's lives.

The main character in *Cat's Eye* returns to her childhood home after being away for decades and is confronted by memories and unresolved issues that have haunted her from childhood. Elaine Risley returns to Toronto as a successful painter for a retrospective of her art. She eventually realizes that, regardless of her success as an adult, it is her painful childhood that shapes her everyday life. She must work through memories of her family, her girlhood friends, past lovers, and most importantly, her true feelings surrounding her friend and tormentor Cordelia.

Elaine's early childhood can be characterized as nomadic. Her father is a nature researcher for the Canadian government and the family travels with him throughout the country. The only home she knows is the inside of their car, where she stares for hours at the backs of her parents' ears. Her constant and

only companion is her older brother Stephen. Because they are frequently on the move, she never attends the same school long enough to form any real friendships with other children. She describes her early childhood:

In the mornings we do our schoolwork, in our workbooks. Our mother tells us which pages to do. Then we read our school readers. Mine is about two children who live in a white house with ruffled curtains, a front lawn, and a picket fence. The father goes to work, the mother wears a dress and an apron, and the children play ball on the lawn with their dog and cat. Nothing in these stories is anything like my life. There are no tents, no highways, no peeing in the bushes, no lakes, no motels. There is no war. The children are always clean, and the little girl, whose name is Jane, wears pretty dresses and patent-leather shoes with straps. (*Cat's* 31)

Her schoolbooks instruct her as to what constitutes a "normal" life. Elaine is aware that her own life is quite different from the picture painted in her books, and she spends much of her childhood attempting to blend in with everyone else and not be seen as an outsider.

Her early life is solitary, yet peaceful and happy. She frequently amuses herself by collecting scraps of cigarette paper to make into something she has yet to decide. Or else she trails behind her brother, playing war games or categorizing insects. Upon reflection, adult Elaine realizes she first learned the ways of young boys, which eventually made the world of young girls that much more difficult to navigate.

When her father accepts a position at a university in Toronto, the family becomes permanently settled in a home. Everything about being settled in a house is new to Stephen and eight-year old Elaine. For the first time she sleeps alone in a room. Even though the house is only half finished when they move in, there is a toilet that “actually flushes” (*Cat’s* 34) and doors to shut people out. She wishes she was back on the road “in [her] old rootless life if impermanence and safety” (*Cat’s* 35). In school she must wear skirts, sit still in desks, cut symmetrical snowflakes out of paper, and enter only through the door marked “Girls.” Many aspects of childhood which most children accept as routine are awkward for Elaine. She learns quickly that she and Stephen cannot act as they are used to toward one another while at school. He is learning the appropriate ways to behave as a young boy, and Elaine knows not to interrupt him during these times. Elaine says, “for me to contact him, or even to call him by name, would be disloyal. I understand these things, and do my best” (*Cat’s* 52).

No longer able to cling to her brother, Elaine decides “I want some friends, friends who will be girls. Girl friends. I know that these exist, having read about them in books, but I’ve never had any girl friends because I’ve never been in one place long enough” (*Cat’s* 30). Upon making her first girl friends, she quickly realizes she does not know “how to be a little girl” the way she imagined she should be. Elaine does not wear her hair or Sunday dresses like the other girls. She feels like an alien when visiting Carol’s “doll house” home for the first time. Likewise, her new friends are openly shocked and critical of Elaine’s home life. Elaine quickly realizes that her mother is very different from the other mothers.

Her mother wears outdoor work clothes all day, skates at the neighborhood rink, and walks the ravine alone. She is “airy and hard to pin down” and does not “inhabit the house the way the other mothers do” (*Cat’s* 173). Elaine is embarrassed of and resentful towards her mother for being different. Yet, she initially feels lucky to have Carol, Grace, and Cordelia as friends, hoping that they will teach her how to act like a girl. She learns about cashmere twin-sets, paper doll cutouts, and playing school. Elaine struggles to dress, speak, act, and think like them. She believes it is the only way to be accepted among girls.

Yet no matter how hard she tries, she always feels inadequate. The other girls, especially Cordelia, compound her distress with constant persecution. With Cordelia as the leader, the girls set about teaching Elaine how to “fit in” with other girls. They constantly criticize every move she makes and every thought she voices. Cordelia gives her commands to stand straighter, walk faster, and sing louder. Elaine is repeatedly told she is stupid, a “goody-goody” (*Cat’s* 136), unclean, and unworthy of their friendship. In the beginning of the friendship, Elaine silently accepts their harsh critiques and instructions. She desperately wants to be accepted, and she believes that is how to accomplish the goal. She says, “I believe each of these comments: my shoulders sag, my spine crumples, I exude the wrong kind of goodness... I make an effort to stand straighter, my body rigid with anxiety” (*Cat’s* 136).

Before long, the abuse escalates and Elaine becomes miserable and fearful of her new friends. While acting out a make-believe story in Cordelia’s backyard, Elaine is told her character is dead and must be buried. They lower

her into a large hole in the ground and cover it with boards and mounds of dirt. She lies in the cold darkness wondering when it will be time to come out. She thinks, "When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one" (*Cat's* 116). As the darkness envelops her, she is overwhelmed by feelings of sadness and betrayal. Elaine identifies this incident as "the point at which I lost power" (*Cat's* 116).

At age nine, Elaine begins to self mutilate. She constantly chews the ends of her hair and gnaws at the cuticles on her fingers until they become raw. Yet it is deliberately peeling strips of skin off the bottom of her feet that gives her the most satisfaction and sense of control. She says, "it was painful to walk, but not impossible. The pain gave me something definite to think about, something immediate. It was something to hold on to" (*Cat's* 124). She peels away her skin as a means of release from the constant stress she suffers under Cordelia. But it is the physical pain that is most important to Elaine. Every painful step she takes on her raw feet gives her a feeling of power. It is a power that she alone holds, not Cordelia.

The girls also exclude her from activities as a form of punishment when she does not meet their expectations. Once, while on a group outing, Elaine is forced to sit separately from the other girls as penance for some perceived wrong. She realizes "it's something I said wrong, but I don't know what it is because they won't tell me" (*Cat's* 127). Elaine is subjected to the punishment until she can name and apologize for the mistake she made. She soon realizes

that “little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized” (*Cat’s* 129).

She, nevertheless, continues the relationship out of a profound fear of isolation and rejection. She notices that the cutting remarks are never said within hearing of adults or even other children. The dynamics that the four girls share must remain a secret to outsiders. This actually pleases Elaine because it includes her in a group, regardless of the nature of the union. She knows that betraying the group’s trust “would be the greatest, the irreparable sin.” She would find herself “cast out forever” (*Cat’s* 131). Therefore she remains a part of the first group of girlfriends she has ever known.

One day, Elaine wins a prize cat’s eye marble during a schoolyard game. She uses this beloved marble as a means of creating a sanctuary from Cordelia and the other girls. She imagines it provides her a special sort of protection, where nothing can be said or done that would penetrate the invisible shield the marble creates. She carries it in her pocket and clings to it when she needs support. When Cordelia questions her about what she is clutching, Elaine easily replies, “It’s only a marble” because it is “marble season and everyone has marbles in their pockets” (*Cat’s* 157). She is the only one who knows the power of the cat’s eye marble.

Elaine also finds relief in travelling north with her family during the summertime. Elaine is more comfortable with herself and more connected to her surroundings while living the seemingly difficult and solitary life on the move. She feels more isolated in the company of her friends than secluded in the

wilderness. As they travel north, leaving Toronto and Cordelia behind, Elaine expresses a deep sense of relief:

My throat is no longer tight, I've stopped clenching my teeth, the skin on my feet has begun to grow back, my fingers have healed partially. I can walk without seeing how I look from the back, talk without hearing the way I sound. I go for long periods without saying anything at all. I can be free of words now, I can lapse back into wordlessness, I can sink into the rhythms of transience as if into bed. (*Cat's* 158)

Upon her return to Toronto, Elaine finds Cordelia more tyrannical and relentless than ever. "She's backing me toward an edge, like the edge of a cliff: one step back, another step, and I'll be falling over" (*Cat's* 171). Elaine retreats into her world of powerful marbles and physically destructive behavior. But as the treatment becomes more and more unbearable, she discovers a new method of withdrawal. Elaine learns how to faint on command. She begins to use fainting as a way to avoid painful or humiliating situations. She views it as jumping in time, skipping the difficult parts. Elaine learns to mentally detach herself from her body and watch from above. This defense mechanism allows her to cushion the pain of reality and survive.

The cruelest of all the incidents occurs one winter day while the girls walk home from school. The route home takes them over a creek which they have been instructed not to go near for fear of "bad men" lurking there. Cordelia throws Elaine's hat down into the bank of the forbidden creek as punishment for

some supposed infraction. Elaine knows she must retrieve her hat because if she returns home without it she will be forced to tell her mother what Cordelia has done. She also worries that if she refuses, Cordelia "might get angry, she might never speak to me again[,] she might push me off the bridge" (*Cat's* 207). In Elaine's attempt to reach her hat, she falls through the ice and plunges into the freezing water. She manages to pull herself out of the water and lies on the bank, literally freezing and awaiting help. But Cordelia and the other girls have left her. As hypothermia sets in, Elaine envisions the Virgin Mary descending through the air to save her and a feeling of warmth surrounds her. Elaine stumbles up the bank where she meets her mother, frantically running in search of her daughter. From this point on, she connects the image of the Virgin Mary and her mother with safety and comfort and it becomes a prominent image in her art.

The turning point in Elaine's childhood comes unexpectedly and without fanfare. Amidst an onslaught of insults, Elaine simply says, "I don't care" to Cordelia and walks away. She has stepped off the cliff "believing that the air will hold [her] up... and it does" (*Cat's* 213). She realizes there was never anything about her that needed improvement; it was all just a game for Cordelia's amusement. "They are not my best friends or even my friends. Nothing binds me to them. I am free" (*Cat's* 214). She realizes that they have to belittle her in order to raise their own self-esteem: "they need me for this, and I no longer need them. I am indifferent to them" (*Cat's* 214). As a result, she finds the courage to walk away from a venomous relationship that had defined her for so long.

As Elaine moves into adolescence, she appears to have blocked all memory of her disastrous entrance into the world of girls. However, details of a portion of her childhood are missing. Her mother even refers to that period as “that bad time you had” (*Cat’s* 221). Her childhood experience with Cordelia and the other girls may be absent from her conscious thought, but Elaine discovers later in life that it has affected her life all along. She becomes “happy as a clam: hardshelled, firmly closed” (*Cat’s* 221).

The characters of *The Robber Bride* also experience childhood trauma that impacts the rest of their lives. Tony describes herself as “hardened off early” (*Robber* 150). As a premature baby, Tony spent the first days of life motherless in an incubator and, looking back, wishes she could have remained that way. Tony possesses no clear image of her mother. Her mother’s memory is composed of “shiny fragments” (*Robber* 150). Tony was a war baby and grows up believing that her parents would have never married if not for her. She feels like a foreigner to her own parents and “like a foreigner she makes mistakes” (*Robber* 161). For instance, Tony is frequently in trouble in school because she insists on writing with her left hand. Her mother wants “Tony changed, fixed, turned right side up, and she wanted it to happen overnight” (*Robber* 153). Even the seemingly insignificant act of writing with a different hand leaves Tony feeling unloved and unaccepted by her own mother.

Like Elaine, Tony divides herself as a means of protection. To the world she is Tony Freemont, a right-handed and obedient daughter. But to herself, she is Tnomerf Ynot, a left-handed rebel. When assuming the character of her inner

name, she is able to express her true feelings. "They are Tnomerf Ynot words. They make her feel powerful, in charge of something" (*Robber* 154). For example, when her parents fight in her presence or her mother makes disparaging remarks about her father, she retreats into the backwards world of Tnomerf Ynot. Her first experience with this inner self occurs when her mother attempts to take young Tony sledding in the snow. Tony is frightened and refuses to get in the sled making her mother disappointed at "having her scenario foiled" (*Robber* 152) so her mother jumps on the sled and rapidly descends the hill leaving Tony behind. On the outside Tony screams "No! No!" at the sight of her mother rapidly disappearing from her view. "But inside herself she could hear another voice, also hers, which was shouting, fearlessly and with ferocious delight: On! On!" (*Robber* 152).

When her mother deserts the family, Tony places much of the blame upon herself. She believes "she hasn't made enough cups of tea, she's misread the signals, she has let go of the string or the rope or the chain or whatever it is that's been attaching her mother to this house" (*Robber* 167). As a result, Tony's memory "divides into what she wanted to happen and what really did happen" (*Robber* 169). She wants to be comforted, to feel safe and protected. In reality, she is left alone except for her perpetually drunken father who chases her around the house proclaiming his fatherly love. She is left with an indescribable vacancy, which she attempts to fill with historical knowledge, dates, and facts. She pours them into her head "to silence the echoes" (*Robber* 170). Her obsession with history, especially wars, carries into her adult life and remains a

place of comfort and security. Her mother dies in a mysterious boating accident and her father commits suicide immediately after her high school graduation. Before he parts with his daughter for the last time, he tells her "you'll do all right" (*Robber* 175). She is finally able to leave home for good and begin to build a life of her own. Yet her parents' memory far from escapes her. She not only bears the weight as a child, but she carries the burden with her into adulthood. "She still believes that the dutiful completion of pre-set tasks will cause her to be loved, although in some dim corner of herself she knows this hasn't worked yet and most likely never will" (*Robber* 155). She keeps her mother's ashes and the pistol with which her father shot himself in her home. She is comfortable having her mother "where she can keep an eye on her" (*Robber* 128). Like historical events and figures, Tony needs to "assign her a location[,] tether her down [and] make her stay put" (*Robber* 128).

Like Tony, Karen's childhood is very unhappy. Her grandmother tells her she was "born to the wrong parents" (*Robber* 257) and Karen could not agree more. Karen is a different kind of war baby than Tony. Her father was killed in the war before she was born, leaving her mother to raise her alone. She is never sure if her parents were actually married. This uncertainty is compounded by the way her family speaks of her, as if she has "the taint of an orphan" (*Robber* 258). She is told that her mother has terrible nerves, which is why Karen is often sent to stay with relatives. Her mother's stress is commonly attributed to the weight and responsibility of raising a child alone. Karen tries to be of little concern or bother to her mother, but some things, like her habit of sleepwalking, can not be

helped. Even though, like Tony, Karen strives to make no mistakes and to complete all pre-set tasks to win love and affection, her mother makes her believe that the nerves are her fault.

Karen blames her mother's "nerves" for the merciless beatings her mother gives her. She hits her with shoes, a pancake flipper, a broom handle, or whatever is in reach. She beats Karen until she cries in pain and then beats her more for causing so much noise. When her mother has exhausted herself, she drops to her knees and tells Karen how sorry she is and how deeply she loves her. This scene is replayed throughout Karen's life with both Billy and Zenia. Karen always forgives because she believes "if someone loved you that made it all right" (*Robber* 260).

At the age of seven, Karen is sent to visit her maternal grandmother because her mother "needed a rest" (*Robber* 261). The day Karen goes to her grandmother's she "peeled the starched skirt away from the backs of her legs, some of the skin came off too, because last night her mother had used the pancake flipper, not the flat way but sideways; she had used the cutting edge and there had been blood" (*Robber* 261). Her grandmother lives on a farm and Karen lives happily and simply there, giving her a chance to heal physically and emotionally. She helps weeding the garden, collecting hen eggs, and caring for the animals. While living at the farm, Karen discovers that her grandmother possesses a kind of mystical healing power for the body and spirit. One day a local man comes to the farm bleeding profusely from an accident. Karen watches as her grandmother touches his injured arm and "a blue glow [comes]

out from her grandmother's hand, and then it's gone and the blood has stopped" (*Robber* 275). Karen cannot verbalize what she sees in her grandmother, but she instinctively learns from her to see colors more vividly and feel emotions more profoundly.

After a time, Karen is sent to live with her Aunt Vi and Uncle Vern to attend school. Her mother has been committed to an insane asylum after attempting suicide. In school, Karen, unlike Elaine, is neither befriended nor teased. She is mostly ignored. She makes herself "invisible" by "suck[ing] in the light around her body" (*Robber* 283). In this way, she is able to go through the motions of everyday life without being present mentally or emotionally, thus making herself invulnerable. Karen believes she will be able to survive if she can continue making herself invisible and floating through childhood.

But after living with her aunt and uncle for about one year, Uncle Vern begins sexually molesting Karen. Somewhat parallel to Tony and her father, Uncle Vern "lurks" about the house, waiting for her with his "sausage fingers" (*Robber* 288). He only molests Karen when her Aunt Vi is also at home. Karen assumes he does this because he enjoys the danger of possibly getting caught. Still, they call her their own daughter and tell her they love her. "It hurts, but Karen knows that people who love you can do painful things to you, and she tries hard to believe that he does love her" (*Robber* 288). Even though her "fear of Aunt Vi finding out is greater than her fear of Uncle Vern's sausage fingers" (*Robber* 288), she tries to tell her aunt about the molestation. Sadly, her aunt

refuses to believe Karen and tells her to pray for forgiveness. Once again Karen is disappointed by a mother figure who should have protected her.

Uncle Vern discovers Karen has told her aunt and the abuse escalates. He comes into her room one night and begins to rape her. "He splits her in two right up the middle and her skin comes open like the dry skin of a cocoon" (*Robber* 290). This is the birth of Charis. That night Karen learns to protect herself by splitting into two, and she becomes Charis while her uncle rapes her. "She's disgusted with him, but also with her body, because it still has his dirt inside it. She must think of ways to get clean inside" (*Robber* 292). She resigns those feelings and memories to Karen and permanently splits apart. She stays with the "cooler part, the cleaner part of herself" (*Robber* 292). From now on she is Charis and the abuse of childhood remains with Karen.

The changing of one's name and the shift in identity is also important in the childhood of Roz. In early childhood, she is known as Rosalind Greenwood. Her father is mysteriously absent "because of the war" (*Robber* 352) and her mother runs a rooming house to support them. Roz's mother is a harsh woman of few words. She cleans the house to the point of exhaustion and repeatedly stresses to her daughter, "Look at my hands... I work my fingers to the bone" (*Robber* 354) as if to demonstrate the toll life is taking on her body. Roz later incorporates her mother's distress over her appearance in her own struggle to keep her husband's love and attention. She helps with the endless cleaning because "Roz's mother wanted the house to be decent for her father when he

came, and since they never knew when that might be, it had to be decent all the time" (*Robber* 355).

Roz considers herself to be different from the other children in the neighborhood or at school but she does not know the exact reason. She has a "round face and dark straight hair and bangs" and is "big for her age," (*Robber* 358) but she does not believe it is these features that separate her. Because of her dark skin tone, schoolmates tell her she is "not a real Catholic" or call her a "DP," meaning Displaced Person (*Robber* 364). She does not feel like the others. She is "among them but she [isn't] part of them. So she would push and shove, trying to break her way in" (*Robber* 360) to the circle of children. This determination to break invisible barriers and enter forbidden realms follows Roz into adulthood. Her position of power at the company her father founded is gained by making a career out of pushing and shoving her way through any obstacle in her way.

Upon her father's return home, Roz feels her life is "cut in two" (*Robber* 367). One side includes her mother, the rooming house, the nuns, and the other girls at school. This side consists mostly of women who hold power over Roz "because even though God and Jesus are men it's her mother and the nuns who have the last word" (*Robber* 368). The other side consists of her father and her "uncles." They fill the house with noise and smell and cause her "unbending" (*Robber* 368) mother to bend to their wishes and demands. Roz takes shelter at her father's side, for she knows her mother will not contradict her father's requests. Her father protests at Roz helping with the dishes because he insists,

"I didn't see her for so long" (*Robber 368*). Yet once again, in the absence of her father, Roz's mother calls her a "spoiled brat" and sneers, "Look at my hands!" (*Robber 368*) to remind Roz of the sacrifices she makes.

Right before Roz starts high school, her father comes into a substantial amount of money. Initially, Roz is not told how the family came to be wealthy. She perceives the money to have appeared "out of thin air" (*Robber 379*). Yet in time her "uncles" slip and tell her that her father is essentially a crook who gained the money by deceiving and helping others during the war. They move into a large home, hire a maid, and purchase a new wardrobe for each family member. Her father says, "it is what we waited for" (*Robber 380*) but her mother wanders the house "as if she was looking for something" (*Robber 379*). Roz is also uncomfortable with her dramatically different life. She attends a new school, learns she is Jewish instead of Catholic and, like Tony and Karen, has a second name of Roz Grunwald. She is told that during the war that name "was too Jewish" (*Robber 380*) and so they adopted the surname, Greenwood.

At her new school, Jewish is "the thing to be" (*Robber 380*). Yet once again, Roz is an outsider, a "strange half-person" (*Robber 381*). Whereas she was once not Catholic enough, now she is not Jewish enough. She lacks the background, history, and upbringing to be considered fully Jewish. "She finds herself in a foreign country. She's an immigrant, a displaced person" (*Robber 381*). Her father sends her to a Jewish summer camp where she finds herself even more of an interloper. Roz does not know the "cute folk dances from Israel" or the "mournful minor-key Yiddish songs" (*Robber 381*). She does not know

how to sail, make a cake, or do craft projects. When listening to the other girls complain about their mothers, Roz wants to join in the conversation. She realizes that “her complaints do not count because her mother isn’t Jewish” (*Robber* 381). At the conclusion of summer camp, Roz concludes that she will never be “prettier, daintier, thinner, sexier, or harder to impress than these girls are.” Instead, she decides to be “smarter, funnier, and richer” (*Robber* 382).

In *Lady Oracle*, all of Joan’s childhood experiences and memories center around two issues: her mother and/or her weight. Her mother is essentially cruel to Joan, her only child. Similar to other characters such as Karen and Tony in *The Robber Bride*, Joan learns from a young age that her mother did not even want to have a child and was forced into the marriage because of the pregnancy. She once overhears her mother tell her father, “It’s not as though I wanted to have her. It’s not as though I wanted to marry you. I had to make the best of a bad job” (*Lady* 73). Her mother named her after the famous actress Joan Crawford. Joan assumes her mother did this because she wanted her daughter to be beautiful, successful, and most importantly, thin. Joan is none of these things and “this is one of the many things for which [her] mother never quite forgave [her]” (*Lady* 39). Their mother/daughter relationship is “professionalized early” (*Lady* 63) in that Joan never refers to her as anything but “Mother.” Her mother uses metaphors such as “on her hands [and] in her hair” (*Lady* 85) to describe her daughter, even though she seldom actually touches her. Her mother views herself as “the manager, the creator, [and] the agent” and Joan “was to be the product” (*Lady* 63). When her mother loses interest in Joan or

becomes frustrated with her shortcomings, she immerses herself in redecorating or throwing a party. Joan discovers early that she could never be anything but a disappointment in her mother's eyes. She knows what her mother wants and makes a conscious effort throughout the rest of her life to become the exact opposite.

When she is seven years old, Joan is enrolled in dance lessons. She loves attending dance class, even though her mother and her dance instructor, who is "almost as slender and disapproving as [her] mother" (*Lady* 39), make little attempt to hide their repulsion at her ever increasing size. The night of the final recital, her mother and dance teacher decide it would be personally embarrassing to allow heavysset Joan on stage in the tiny butterfly costume. They concoct a plan to completely cover Joan's body and allow her onstage as a mothball. The two women try to suggest that the change is a privilege, but Joan is deeply wounded nonetheless. She reflects, "the worst thing was that I still didn't quite understand why this was being done to me, this humiliation disguised as privilege" (*Lady* 46). This experience is her first taste of life as an overweight person. She realizes that "sympathy for an overweight seven-year-old stuffed into a mothball suit and forced to dance" (*Lady* 48) is practically impossible to elicit. Yet if she were "charming and skinny," the entire situation would be "pathetic and grossly unfair" (*Lady* 48).

Following the failure of dance lessons, Joan's mother enrolls her in Brownies. Her mother claims it is a good way for Joan to adjust and make friends, yet she places her in the Brownie troop of a different, more upscale

neighborhood causing Joan to become more removed from her schoolmates. In a situation similar to Elaine's in *Cat's Eye*, Joan walks a route home from Brownies that includes crossing a ravine. Like Elaine, she is repeatedly warned to beware of "bad men" lurking in the ravine. Her mother instructs her to "run away as fast as you can" if one should approach, but she warns her daughter in a "voice that suggested that no matter how fast I ran I would never be able to get away" (*Lady* 49). As with Elaine, Joan's mother never tells her what these men would look like or what they would do if they caught her, leaving "the field wide open to [her] imagination" (*Lady* 50).

Like in *Cat's Eye*, Joan walks home with three older girls who quickly become sources of torture. Joan also quickly learns that with girls, "words were not a prelude to war but the war itself, a devious, subterranean war that was unending because there were no decisive acts, no knockdown blows that could be delivered, no point at which you could say *I give in*. She who cried first was lost" (*Lady* 53). Once they discover how easy it is to make her cry, they become relentlessly cruel to Joan. For the girls, the game involves coming up with new ways to belittle, scold, and frighten Joan, with the ultimate goal of making her cry.

Sometimes they would just run off; other times they would threaten to run off. Sometimes they would claim that their running off was a punishment, deserved by me, for something I had done or hadn't done that day: I had skipped too heavily in the fairy ring, I hadn't stood straight enough, my tie was rumped, I had dirty fingernails, I was fat. (*Lady* 55)

In the girls' most extreme act of cruelty, they convince her to allow them to blindfold her and tie her hands together in order to be initiated into their secret club. They leave her in the ravine, just as Elaine was left in the freezing water, to fend for herself. Joan knows that she cannot tell her mother because she would surely side with the girls and lament over the "limp balloon" (*Lady* 55) her daughter turned out to be.

The only person in Joan's childhood who makes her happy or comfortable with herself is her Aunt Lou. Aunt Lou is her mother's sister and is "built like an Eaton's Catalog corset ad for the mature figure, but she doesn't seem to mind" (*Lady* 77). Aunt Lou takes Joan to the movie theater, where they gorge themselves on candy and cry at the movie. "These binges of approved sniveling were among the happiest moments of [her] childhood" (*Lady* 77). Aunt Lou is the only person Joan can talk, cry, and eat with in complete peace. She also stands up for Joan against her mother. Her mother believes that "nobody who looked like [her] could ever accomplish anything, but Aunt Lou was all for dismissing handicaps or treating them as obstacles to be overcome" (*Lady* 81).

Aunt Lou is also responsible for introducing the Spiritualists into Joan's life. Aunt Lou and her married lover, Robert, attend a service at the Jordan Chapel every Sunday. The service is led by the Reverend Leda Sprott and the "visiting medium," (*Lady* 103) Mr. Stewart. Because the message is the same every week, Joan assumes people only attend to receive messages from the dead issued by Mr. Stewart. Though Joan is skeptical about the actual power Reverend Sprott holds and the validity of the messages from the dead, she does

take some of what she hears at the Jordan Chapel to heart. It is here that Joan is first introduced to her mother's astral body, or spirit, which continues to appear and influence her throughout her adult life. It is not important whether the appearances of her mother's spirit, both before and after her death, are real or simply imagined by Joan. Rather, it is another example of how her mother continues to influence her life against her will.

Joan also fantasizes about holding power like Leda Sprott. She imagines, "I could do it if I wanted to; humble beginnings in an unknown chapel; miraculous revelations; fame spreads; auditoriums packed; thousands helped; whispered comments, awe and admiration—"She may be a *large* woman, but what powers" (*Lady* 110)!

In addition to suffering from her mother's terrible treatment, Joan's weight is a struggle that originated in childhood and persists throughout adulthood. At the age of fifteen, she is five feet eight inches tall and weighs two hundred and forty-five pounds. Her mother no longer allows her to attend her dinner parties. She does not want her "gracious-hostess act" to be ruined by her daughter who looks like "a beluga whale and never opens her mouth except to put something into it" (*Lady* 70). Her mother heartlessly berates Joan about her excessive weight. She even goes so far as to ice a cake with melted Ex-Lax and leave it out for Joan to devour, causing her to "be wretched but not thin" (*Lady* 83).

Once Joan realizes how much her weight disturbs her mother, she uses it as a means of empowering herself. For example, her mother tries to dress her inconspicuously, in an attempt to hide the fat with clothing by "designers for the

fat" (*Lady* 83). Joan, however, "sought out clothes of a peculiar and offensive hideousness, violently colored, horizontally striped" (*Lady* 83). "She wasn't going to let [herself] be diminished, neutralized, by a navy-blue polka-dot sack" (*Lady* 84). Her mother's evident frustration elates Joan as evidence of her power. She "wouldn't let her [mother] make [her] over in her image, thin and beautiful" (*Lady* 84). Though this form of rebellion may appear to be more detrimental to Joan than uplifting, the power she gains over her mother is more important to her than her image or her health.

The turning point in Joan's issues with her weight comes with the death of her beloved Aunt Lou. Aunt Lou's will stipulates that Joan is to receive a substantial sum of money on the condition that she lose one hundred pounds. Because this money will provide a means of escape from her mother, Joan does not perceive losing weight to be surrendering to her mother's wishes. But Joan is not prepared for just how acutely the weight loss would affect her entire life. She thinks, "I wasn't adjusted. I'd spent all my life learning to be one person and now I was a different one. I had been an exception, with the limitations that imposed; now I was average, and I was far from used to it" (*Lady* 142). Her mother has the opposite reaction Joan expected to her dramatic weight loss. Her mother becomes angrier and even tries to make Joan gain back the weight. Joan believes this unexpected reaction is due to the fact that making Joan lose weight was the only project her mother had left and she feels lost without it.

Joan severs contact with her mother during her senior year of high school. Her mother had become increasingly verbally abusive and it erupts into physical

violence one afternoon when she stabs Joan in the arm with a paring knife. Even though Joan moves out that very day, the emotional abuse she suffered from her mother remains influential throughout her life. Referencing Coleridge's poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Joan refers to her mother as the "rotting albatross" (*Lady* 213) she carries around her neck. The adult Joan blames her mother for everything from her inability to properly cook a meal to her inability to make any one else happy. Even as an adult, Joan believes "that the absence of wonderful things happening had been due to [her] own failure, [her] insufficient love" (*Lady* 283).

Another way that Joan continues to carry her childhood traumas with her is through her fascination with and dreams about the Fat Lady. Her obsession with the Fat Lady is introduced during a trip to the Canadian National Exhibition with Aunt Lou. A Freak Show tent touts "the fattest woman in the world," but Aunt Lou does not allow Joan to enter, explaining that "it's wrong to laugh at other people's misfortunes" (*Lady* 86). Joan does not accept this reason because she knows people laugh at her weight, and not being allowed to see the Fat Lady for herself increases her fascination and tantalizes her imagination.

The image of the Fat Lady appears numerous times throughout *Lady Oracle*, mostly as a character in Joan's dreams. Joan "wanted to forget the past, but it refused to forget [her]; it waited for sleep, then cornered [her]" (*Lady* 213). In these dreams, the Fat Lady is always dressed in some sort of dance costume, echoing Joan's childhood trauma with the dance recital. The onlookers watch as the Fat Lady performs some act such as ice skating or tight rope walking, waiting

anxiously for her to fail. Joan often lapses into fantasies about the Fat Lady when she feels trapped, frightened, or overwhelmed at the prospect of having her past as an overweight person discovered. Eventually, Joan fully melds herself into the character of the Fat Lady in her dreams. Though the Fat Lady dreams have always been a reflection of Joan's feelings, as her insecurities increase she recognizes that she is the Fat Lady in her dreams. At the end of the novel, when Joan is hiding in Italy, she becomes one with 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. (*Lady* 321)

While other characters, like Elaine, Tony, Charis, and Roz, are ultimately able to rise above their haunting childhoods, Joan succumbs to the trauma and memories she cannot escape.

CHAPTER II: RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN

The women in the three novels also struggle with relationships with men. These difficulties can often be traced to the woman's character traits or her own childhood. They often cling to defective relationships in a struggle to succeed and replace past disappointments. The characters also act as the mother they never had to their significant others. Married, single or divorced, the women of *Cat's Eye*, *Lady Oracle*, and *The Robber Bride* experience complex and difficult relationships with men.

As previously discussed, Elaine's early childhood is spent travelling with her family; therefore her initial experience with boys comes through her brother Stephen. He has a "low opinion of most girls" and occasionally "decides that it's his duty to educate" his sister in order to prevent her from becoming a "pin-headed fuzzbrain" (*Cat's* 241). Elaine credits Stephen with keeping her from being vain and teaching her foul words and phrases only boys use. Later in life, this inside knowledge of boys and their habits allows her to be comfortable around boys her own age. Stephen also helps Elaine develop her mind by instructing her in principles of higher mathematics and other upper level concepts. He does not treat Elaine as a mindless, vapid female but introduces her to the idea of being equal to men in intellect and worthy of serious time and consideration.

As a child, Elaine's mother warns her to stay away from the neighborhood ravine where "shadowy, nameless men who do things to you" lie there in wait for unsuspecting young girls (*Cat's* 53). Elaine and her friends must cross the bridge over this ravine on their route home from school. In the eyes of the young girls, it is a daily reminder of the mysterious and seemingly dangerous nature of men. The girls whisper when saying the word men "as if they are a special, thrilling joke" (*Cat's* 53). Young Elaine views men with a mixture of caution and amazement, all the while wondering what details the adults and her friends leave out in their warnings regarding consequences.

The first man outside of her family to make a lasting impression on Elaine is Mr. Banerji. He is a graduate student of her father's from India who has no acquaintances in the country besides his colleagues at the university. When he joins the family for Christmas dinner, Elaine feels that she and Mr. Banerji are kindred to one another in that they are both foreigners struggling in a strange place. Mr. Banerji is alone in a country where he is unaccustomed to the native habits and traditions. Likewise, Elaine is alone in the strange world of girls where she precariously treads through the unknown customs and policies.

Interestingly, she does not directly associate Mr. Banerji as being a man. Rather, she thinks of him as "a creature more like myself: alien and apprehensive" (*Cat's* 143). She draws connections between herself and Mr. Banerji by realizing that "[h]e's afraid of us. He has no idea what we will do next, what impossibilities we will expect of him, what we will make him eat. No wonder he bites his fingers" (*Cat's* 143). She equates her fear of making mistakes

around Cordelia and the other girls to Mr. Banerji's apprehensive manner around her family. His fear surfaces by the biting of his fingers just as Elaine peels skin off her fingers in reaction to her fear and stress. Elaine also "knows he's miserable underneath his smiles and politeness" (*Cat's* 142) just as she too is unhappy on the inside. She reflects that she is "developing a knack for this, [sniffing] out hidden misery in others now with hardly any effort at all" (*Cat's* 142). She awaits more of his visits with an "anxiety" resulting from a "fellow feeling" (*Cat's* 176). She wants to witness "how he is managing, how he is coping with his life" (*Cat's* 176) because it gives her hope in surviving as a foreigner.

As an adolescent, Elaine finds relationships with boys her own age to be effortless. It is girls she feels awkward with and must "defend [her]self against" (*Cat's* 260) whereas relationships with boys produce little anxiety. This ease and almost apathy comes from her singular understanding and perception of boys which she developed from her close relationship with her brother Stephen. She believes that when talking to a boy, "they must not be startled by too many words, spoken too quickly" (*Cat's* 260). She welcomes the inevitable gaps in conversation that most of her friends find unpleasant. She understands that "boys by nature require these silences" (*Cat's* 260) as a means of escape. Boys try to escape from adults and other boys, and Elaine wants to escape from adults and other girls; therefore she finds a comfortable balance in the relationship.

Elaine, therefore, feels she possesses an understanding of boys that other girls lack. She knows that boys are "fearful about their own bodies, shy about what to say, afraid of being laughed at" (*Cat's* 261). She knows how they talk

when exclusively in the company of other boys, especially talk concerning females. Elaine likens male adolescents' use of words such as "stunned broad, dog, bag and bitch" to childhood terms such as "pickled ox eyes and snot eating" (*Cat's* 261). She sees them as "prove-it words" (*Cat's* 261) boys use to display strength and independence from women. These words are aimed at girls who sway "their little hips as if they think they're seductive" (*Cat's* 261) and remain indifferent to the boys around them. Elaine knows boys use these words to reduce, to "cut them down to size so they can be handled" (*Cat's* 261). She sees boys' use of degrading words as a manifestation of their own insecurity and forgives them for it.

Elaine's first sexual relationship is with her art teacher, Josef Hrbik. At the onset of their relationship, Elaine feels that Josef needs her protection. Their affair quickly becomes intense, both emotionally and sexually, and she finds herself "in love with his need" (*Cat's* 322). Josef is not exclusive with Elaine as she is with him. He regularly sleeps with other women, including a fellow art student of Elaine's named Susie. Though Josef claims that their relationship is a secret from Susie, Elaine worries that "they may discuss [her] the way [they] discuss Susie" (*Cat's* 333). Nevertheless she finds the relationship intoxicating. She views Josef's "place in the scheme of things[...] to be a lover, with his secrecy and his almost-empty rooms" (*Cat's* 323). She uses some of her childhood understandings about boys to justify her affair with Josef in terms of his unpredictability and unwillingness to commit to an exclusive relationship.

However, when Elaine does become his only lover, she cannot handle “the weight of Josef” (*Cat’s* 350). He clings to her and silently begs her to absolve him of his own guilt and misery. She alone is not enough for him, and she feels smothered by the need she once craved. When she breaks up with him, Josef becomes visibly despondent. Elaine is repulsed by “a man who can allow himself to be reduced to such rubble by women” (*Cat’s* 351). This poignant realization can be viewed not only as Elaine’s subconscious decision to free herself from men who are dependent upon her, but also as her own desire for freedom from that which diminishes her.

Elaine next becomes involved with a fellow artist named Jon. She views their relationship as an offer of “escape, running away from the grown-ups[,...] fun, and mess” (*Cat’s* 345). They both attempt to keep the affair uncomplicated and light. For example, Elaine does not clean his apartment, even put away dirty dishes, in a conscious effort to not appear controlling or motherly. She worries Jon will assume she is “moving in on him” and attempting to “take him over” (*Cat’s* 196) and that he will begin to resent her. When she does fall into a pattern of domesticity by doing his laundry and making his coffee, he patronizes her by stating that she will make someone a good wife. She realizes this implies that he has no intention of making her his own wife. When Elaine discovers she is pregnant, she assumes Jon will want her to “have it out, like a tooth” (*Cat’s* 365). Instead they marry at City Hall “for the oldest of reasons” (*Cat’s* 371) and enter into a marriage neither really wanted, just as many of the mothers had done.

Elaine views her relationship with her first husband, Jon, like that with Mr. Banerji in that they are kindred spirits. While Mr. Banerji and Elaine shared the status of foreigner, however, she and Jon share something “like a traffic accident” (*Cat’s* 18). She feels that they are “survivors of each other” and have served as both “shark” and “lifeboat” (*Cat’s* 18) to one another. During their marriage, they even resort to physical violence. They scream and throw things at each other, and Elaine sees “how the line is crossed between histrionics and murder” (*Cat’s* 376). After the divorce, they maintain contact mostly because of their daughter Sarah, but also because of the comfort they find in their past and their similarities. Upon returning to Toronto for her retrospective, Elaine reflects that she “prefer[s] the shedding and disorder and personal dirt of people like myself, [and] people like Jon. Transients and nomads” (*Cat’s* 17). Yet these similar character traits also caused conflicts. Looking back, Elaine realizes that they began their relationship running from becoming true adults. When they were forced to become adults themselves, they began to fight with one another “over [their] right to remain children” (*Cat’s* 372). They tried to outdo one another in terms of suffering. For example, if one got a headache, the other complained of a migraine. This became the “crux” (*Cat’s* 372) of their failed marriage.

Elaine’s second and current husband at the time of the retrospective is very different from Jon and herself. Ben runs a travel agency, and Elaine notes that “among his other sterling qualities are cheap tickets to the Yucatan” (*Cat’s* 15). When they first met, she was not seeking out another man. She had rightly “exhausted the notion that the answer to a man is another man” (*Cat’s* 218). But

Ben is uncomplicated and easy to please, and she finds comfort and relief in their relationship. He fixes her back porch “as in the women’s magazines of long ago” (*Cat’s* 416), tells her silly jokes, and takes her on trips. Yet she worries that she may begin to take him for granted. She thinks she needs to “remember what bad for me is like,” like eating junk food after a long stint of healthy eating (*Cat’s* 195). This is how she justifies eventually sleeping with Jon while married to Ben. She feels she is not “being disloyal to Ben, only loyal to something else; which predates him, which has nothing to do with him” (*Cat’s* 402).

Unlike Elaine, Joan, *Lady Oracle’s* protagonist, has very little experience with members of the opposite sex before she enters adulthood. As a child, she hears similar warnings of “bad men” who will do unspeakable things to little girls if they allow themselves to get caught. She once encounters a man near the ravine who holds a bundle of daffodils and exposes himself to her, but she is unfazed. Soon after that incident, Joan is left in the ravine by her childhood tormentors. A man she does not know unties her and walks her home. She is unsure, but she believes the man who rescues her is the same man who previously flashed her. Young Joan is disturbed at not knowing whether the man is a “rescuer or a villain” (*Lady* 60). Yet the more disturbing thought is if “it is possible for a man to be both at once” (*Lady* 60).

Joan’s next experiences with men are what she categorizes as her first three sexual experiences. While in high school, Joan has many girlfriends because they are not threatened by her presence around boys due to her obesity. After walking home with a girlfriend and her male admirer, the rejected

boy seeks consolation by burying his head in Joan's stomach. Joan defines this as her first sexual experience. Her second sexual experience takes place during one of her part-time jobs. A "sprightly, bright-eyed foreigner" (*Lady 95*) who works in the restaurant's kitchen proposes marriage to Joan. She denies him partly because she realizes he wishes to marry her because she is "the shape of a wife already" (*Lady 97*). Her third sexual experience involves another co-worker. A young man she works with at an amusement park "took his hand off the wheel and patted [her] on the knee" (*Lady 113*) while driving her home. These seemingly insignificant events are defining moments for adolescent Joan regarding the opposite sex.

After Joan loses one hundred pounds to receive her aunt's money, she experiences men very differently. "Strange men, whose gaze had previously slid over and around [her] as though [she] wasn't there, began to look at [her] from truck-cab windows and construction sites; a speculative look, like a dog eyeing a fire hydrant" (*Lady 119*). As with other aspects of her life after the weight loss, relationships with men are uncharted territory she must learn to navigate. She did not naturally develop the "usual female fears: fear of intruders, fear of the dark, fear of gasping noises over the phone, fear of bus stops and slowing cars, fear of anyone or anything outside whatever magic circle defines safety" (*Lady 138*). These fears had to be developed artificially once she "shrank to normal size" (*Lady 138*).

Joan meets her first lover while living in London. She falls off a bus, twists her ankle, and the Polish Count comes to her aid. He is forty-one at the time of

their meeting; therefore Joan assigns him to the category of “aged and therefore harmless men” (*Lady* 145). The Polish Count tells Joan his sad story of escape and exile from his home country; and because of Joan’s romantic nature, she immediately believes him. Joan is entranced by his exotic background and mysterious nature and quickly moves in with him. Because she is innocent and inexperienced, she becomes his mistress somewhat unwillingly. Joan had moved into the Count’s apartment under the impression she would be his roommate only, but the first night a man “whose first name [she] didn’t even know” (*Lady* 147) appears in her bedroom. “He understood that he was getting into bed with [her], and he understood that [she] understood this also” (*Lady* 147). Joan adheres to the maxim “if you find yourself trapped in a situation you can’t get out of gracefully, you might as well pretend you chose it” (*Lady* 148); therefore, she submits to sex with the Polish Count. Her first real sexual experience is unsatisfactory as the Count becomes remorseful after learning he has taken Joan’s virginity. Despite this, she is pleased it happened. It proves to her that she has finally reached the status of normal due to her dramatic weight loss. Her “halo of flesh had disappeared and [she] was no longer among the untouchables” (*Lady* 149).

As his mistress, the Polish Count, whose real name she learns is Paul, does not expect much of her except order and timeliness. He trains her “like training a dog” (*Lady* 151) to perform as his ideal mistress. Paul reminds her of the daffodil man from her childhood in that they both have “an air of well-meaning but misplaced gallantry” (*Lady* 157). Beneath their eccentricities they are both

“gentle and harmless, asking only simple gratifications” (*Lady* 157). Both men are also her rescuers. Yet the most important influence Paul has on Joan involves her writing. She discovers that he writes “trashy nurse novels” (*Lady* 152) under a penname. After reading some of these books, she begins to write her own version of “escape literature” (*Lady* 154). It is with this that her career as a gothic novelist begins. Ultimately their relationship ends because “[she] believed in true love, he believed in wives and mistresses; [she] thought [she] was in love with him, he was old and cynical enough to know [she] wasn’t” (*Lady* 158). He appears in her life once more, much later, with a proposition to reunite. But the romance and mystery are gone. He turns up as a business man in suit and tie, no longer the exotic Polish Count.

During the end of her affair with the Polish Count, Joan meets a political activist named Arthur. Arthur is a “melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes, idealistic and doomed” (*Lady* 164) and Joan falls in love with him immediately. She fakes interest in his political ideology and he finds her a pleasing companion. He incessantly preaches on his “philosophy of disobedience,” (*Lady* 167) and Joan merely nods and agrees. As with the Polish Count, she quickly moves into his apartment and becomes completely immersed in a life with Arthur. She is “bliss-filled and limpid-eyed: the right man had come along, complete with a cause [she] could devote [herself] to. [Her] life had significance” (*Lady* 170). Despite her previous contempt for stereotypical female norms, she becomes the embodiment of the women she loathed becoming.

Similar to many of the women in Atwood's novels, Joan keeps many secrets from Arthur. Joan lies to Arthur both to protect him from sorrow and to protect herself from the discovery of aspects of her life she wishes to remain hidden. She never tells Arthur about her childhood struggle with her mother and her weight. She tells him her mother was a "kind, placid woman" (*Lady* 37) who died from a rare disease. Joan thinks she cannot "trust him with all that discarded misery, [she doesn't] think he would be able to handle it" (*Lady* 88). In addition, she hides her hidden career authoring gothic novels. She fears he will lose respect for her if he knew she writes novels he would consider trivial and worthless. Joan also keeps her relationship with the Polish Count from Arthur. She invents the story of her first sexual experience as taking place at summer camp "under a pine tree at the age of sixteen" (*Lady* 147). In order to move out of the Count's apartment and into Arthur's, she tells Arthur that her landlord evicted her on account of her radical political beliefs. She knows Arthur will not reject harboring a "political refugee" (*Lady* 169). She feels she cannot divulge the particulars of the Polish Count as "he would have been horrified by Paul's title... and by his politics. Any woman who could live with such a man would have been stamped *wrong* by Arthur right away" (*Lady* 161). Because Joan cannot stand the thought of being rejected by Arthur, she continues to present herself in a way pleasing to him. Right before their marriage, Arthur reveals he has always known she lived with another man before him. Joan considers telling Arthur the truth about all her lies, but she changes her mind once she realizes

“how annoyed he’d be if he discovered he’d only made it as far as the first layer” (*Lady* 196) in terms of learning the truth.

Over time, their relationship wears thin, and they become alienated from one another. Arthur bounces from one political project to another and Joan retreats into writing her hidden gothic novels. Just as she was unable to make her mother happy or proud in her childhood, she begins to feel her love no longer makes Arthur happy, and she is once again a failure. He has always expected her to be inept at domestic chores such as cooking. He takes delight in her failure and the position of authority it affords him. But now, “no matter how badly [she] cooks” (*Lady* 212), she is unable to keep him happy. When she is hiding in Italy and presumed dead, she wants very badly for “Arthur to know how clever [she’d] been. He always said [she] was too disorganized to plot [her] way across the floor and out the door, much less out of the country” (*Lady* 23). Joan has finally accomplished something that both her mother and Arthur would never expect from her and she is unable to share it.

While married to Arthur, Joan has an affair with an eccentric artist who calls himself the Royal Porcupine. Their affair is a means of escape for Joan and an opportunity to live the gothic romance she writes about. They dress in Victorian costumes and waltz about the room, living out their fantasies. As the affair progresses, Joan realizes that she is living two completely different lives: one with Arthur and one with the Royal Porcupine:

The difficulty was that I found each of my lives perfectly normal and appropriate, but only at the time. When I was with Arthur, the Royal

Porcupine seemed like a daydream from one of my less credible romances, with an absurdity about him that I tried to exclude from my fictions. But when I was with the Royal Porcupine, he seemed plausible and solid. Everything he did and said made sense in his own terms, whereas it was Arthur who became unreal; he faded to an insubstantial ghost, a washed-out photo on some mantelpiece I'd long ago abandoned.

(Lady 259)

The duplicity in her life becomes dramatic and obvious. She now lives as Arthur's wife, the Royal Porcupine's mistress, a secret gothic romance author, and a formerly obese child. The largest and most difficult duplicity to maintain is hiding her childhood obesity from the people in her life.

The affair ends when the Royal Porcupine, whose real name she learns is Chuck Brewer, becomes insistent on Joan living both of her lives with him only. He wants what Arthur has with her – the reality of a normal married life. “For him, reality and fantasy were the same thing, which meant that for him there was no reality. But for [her], it would mean there was no fantasy, and therefore no escape” (*Lady 270*). Joan depends on her break from reality and escape into a world of fantasy with the Royal Porcupine. She does not want him to become “gray and multi-dimensional and complicated like everyone else” (*Lady 269,270*).

While hiding in Italy, Joan reflects on her previous relationships with men: “I felt I 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” (*Lady 283*). She

uses her relationships with men to satisfy her need for approval, especially after her dramatic weight loss. She also realizes that just as she leads a double life, “every man [she’d] ever been involved with had two selves: [her] father, healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, [her] rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double Chuck Brewer; even Paul, who [she’d] always believed had a sinister other life [she] couldn’t penetrate” (*Lady* 293).

The female character feeling the need to protect and satisfy her male counterparts at all costs is a common thread throughout the three novels. This is extremely pronounced in the three main characters in *The Robber Bride*. Tony meets West while they are college students. Though West is involved with the beautiful but destructive Zenia, Tony develops strong feelings for him. When Zenia suddenly leaves West, he turns to Tony for comfort and support. She dotes on him and nurses his broken heart, thus beginning the pattern their entire relationship follows. Tony is “proud of herself and... drags West from the field of defeat and carts him off behind the lines, and tends his wounds, and mends him” (*Robber* 198). Though he frequently acknowledges how grateful he is to have her in his life, loving him unconditionally and caring for his every need, she retains a “low-level anxiety” (*Robber* 198) that his heart still belongs to Zenia. “Tony is touched by his gratitude and too young to be suspicious of it” (*Robber* 199). She acts like the mother she never had. As previously mentioned, Tony’s own mother abandons the family, and Tony places much of the blame on herself. This guilt carries over into her relationship with West. She tries to make up for whatever was missing from her mother by giving unconditionally to West.

When Zenia returns, however, West leaves Tony brokenhearted and confused. He explains that Zenia is depressed and he must be with her to help get through her difficult time. Tony realizes that West's "blind spot is Zenia's unhappiness. Or else her body. Men... can't seem to tell one from the other" (*Robber* 201). Yet she does not blame West for deserting her after she gave him unconditional love and unending care. She places the blame solely on Zenia. Even in the midst of her deepest despair at West's leaving, she inwardly shouts, "It's not West's fault!" (*Robber* 205) at Roz's well meaning condemnation of West's actions.

A year later, West returns to Tony after being rejected by Zenia once again. She lets him back:

Into her home, into her kitchen, where she made him a hot drink, and ultimately into her bed, where he clutched her, shivering. It was not a sexual clutch, it was the clutch of a man drowning. But Tony was in no danger of being dragged down. She felt, if anything, strangely dry; detached from him. He might be drowning, but this time she was standing on the beach. Worse: with binoculars. (*Robber* 210)

With West back under Tony's care once again, they fall into the former routine of Tony as his savior. She brings him cups of tea just as she once brought her mother cups of tea in a futile attempt to win love and affection.

She remembers "how to care for him, how to pat him back into shape... but this time with fewer illusions" (*Robber* 210). This time, she knows he does not love her the way he loved Zenia and that were Zenia to reappear, he would

go back to her. But Tony is able to reconcile this because she loves caring for West and she depends on his need of her care. A poignant example of her constant protection is that she locks the doors when she leaves their home because "she doesn't want drug addicts getting in while she's away and bothering West" (*Robber* 19). She is once again acting as the protective mother she never had. When Zenia comes back after her presumed death, Tony ineptly plots to kill her in order to protect West from succumbing once again to her charm. "West must be kept out of it as much as possible. He must be insulated. He's already been damaged enough" (*Robber* 122).

Like Tony, Charis is the motherly protector of her boyfriend Billy. Billy enters her life as a draft dodger in need of a safe place to stay. He is seven years her junior and Charis immediately perceives him as a fragile man in need of her gentle love and care. "They both want the same thing: for Billy to be happy" (*Robber* 231). Throughout their relationship Charis always puts his needs and comfort before her own. For example, while deciding what to do early one morning, she thought, "she could go upstairs and get dressed, but it might wake Billy, who needs his sleep because of the strain he's under" (*Robber* 226). The strain Billy actually suffers from is not from his job because the whole time he lives with Charis he does not work steadily, nor does he appear to actively search for a job. Charis relishes working various jobs to be the sole provider for herself and Billy. She is pleased that she can care for him and make him happy in a way that she could never make her own mother happy. To Charis, Billy

shows his gratitude for everything she does for him by staying with her and not abandoning her as her mother did.

Charis teaches an early morning yoga class that “she hardly ever misses unless it’s a case of Billy, Billy and his spontaneous and overpowering [sexual] urges” (*Robber* 240). He occasionally needs her in a sexual capacity so intently that everything must be pushed aside to fulfill his desire. She cannot deny him because it is this need of his that she loves and treasures so dearly. She also feels she cannot tell him no, “I have to work or we don’t eat” (*Robber* 240), because this would appear critical of his not working. Being critical of or unfulfilling to Billy would cause him to leave Charis. Although she does not mind having sex, she does not enjoy it either. For Charis, sex has become another means to please, care for, and ultimately keep a man:

She’d slept with several [men], because you were supposed to and she didn’t want to be considered uptight, or selfish about her body, and she’d even lived with one man, although it hadn’t lasted. He’d ended by calling her a frigid bitch, as if she was doing him some injury or other, which puzzled her. Hadn’t she been affectionate enough, hadn’t she nodded her head when he talked, hadn’t she cooked his meals and laid herself down compliantly whenever he wanted her to, hadn’t she washed the sheets afterwards, hadn’t she tended him? (*Robber* 231)

When Billy betrays her and leaves her for Zenia, Charis is once again puzzled. Like Tony blaming Zenia for West or Charis blaming herself instead of her mother or her uncle, she believes it is because of her own faults and

shortcomings that Billy has left her. After the birth of her daughter, August, Charis “stays away from men, because men and sex are too difficult for her, they are too snarled up with rage and shame and hated and loss, with the taste of vomit and the smell of rancid meat, and with the small golden hairs on Billy’s vanished arms, and with hunger” (*Robber* 317).

While Charis tries to make up for her disastrous relationship with her mother by making Billy happy, Roz’s relationship with Mitch is strikingly parallel to her own mother and father’s relationship. Roz meets Mitch when she is twenty-two and “over the hill” (*Robber* 339). She fears that she will not find a man to marry and will be forced to work for her father for the rest of her life as an unmarried woman. Therefore when handsome Mitch comes along with a hurried marriage proposal, Roz quickly accepts out of fear of letting a seemingly perfect man slip away. She immediately feels inferior to Mitch and unworthy of his attention. Roz does not consider herself to be beautiful and Mitch looks “like a movie mag starlet... too good to be true” (*Robber* 342). Even though she strongly suspects Mitch’s interest in her money to be a large factor in their marriage from the beginning, her insecurities overshadow this knowledge.

As with her friends Charis and Tony, Roz’s life quickly becomes devoted to making Mitch happy. For example, she does not like having a live-in maid, but when they do not have one “there’s no one to do the kids’ lunches and handle the illnesses and last-minute emergencies except Roz, and Roz becomes over-organized and can’t pay enough attention to Mitch, and Mitch gets very short-tempered” (*Robber* 336). Roz is a strong woman in other areas of her life, but

her insecurities cause her to suffer emotional torture at the hands of her husband.

Mitch treats the home Roz has made for him as one would treat a hotel, just as he “treats *her* like a hotel” (*Robber* 79). Over the course of their marriage, Mitch has numerous affairs. Roz knows about them and allows them to go on because she believes “some men need their little escapades. It keeps them toned up. As an addiction it is preferable to alcohol or golf, and Mitch’s things—*things*, she called them, to distinguish them from people—never lasted long” (*Robber* 328). Just as her mother forgave her father’s affairs and dishonest business pursuits, Roz overlooks her husband’s indiscretions in order not to lose him. She rationalizes that “in Mitch’s cosmology Roz’s body represents possessions, solidity, the domestic virtues, hearth and home, long usage. Mother-of-his-children” (*Robber* 330). Like Atwood’s other female characters, Roz works unceasingly to make Mitch happy, sacrificing her own happiness and desires, and she blames herself when he is unfulfilled. She believes that “if she could suffer through Mitch’s attacks like a martyr, weeping and flagellating herself—if she could let them be imposed on her” (*Robber* 333), it would be enough punishment for not being enough to make him happy and driving him to adultery.

Because so much of her emotional and physical energy goes into Mitch’s happiness, his affairs leave Roz understandably feeling undesirable and worthless. She falls under the spell of anti-aging creams and beauty remedies, but nothing she does keeps Mitch from having affairs with younger, more

beautiful women. She thinks, "surely she isn't still trying; surely she isn't still in the man-pleasing business. She's given that up. *I do it for me*, she tells Tony" (*Robber* 80). But the truth is that everything she does is for Mitch and his happiness. She believes "she should've married someone ugly. Some ugly toad of a man who'd never be able to believe his good luck, who'd appreciate her sterling qualities of character, who'd worship her baby finger" (*Robber* 329). Or else Mitch should have married a stunningly beautiful woman because "she would not have taken the kind of crap Roz takes" (*Robber* 330). For Roz, maintaining her looks is her focus in keeping her husband. This is similar to her mother, who obsessed over keeping the home perfectly clean for whenever her husband would return home. Roz is unlike her friends in that while they dote on their significant others in a mothering manner, she mothers, but also attempts to transform herself into what her husband wants and waits for his attention.

CHAPTER III: RELATIONSHIPS WITH WOMEN

Most of the female characters in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, *Lady Oracle* and *The Robber Bride* struggle with their relationships with other women, as they do with men. Largely due to childhood experiences, the women find it difficult to form intimate and lasting bonds with other women. The female characters in *The Robber Bride* differ in that the three main characters discover that they heavily rely on the friendship they have formed.

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine's childhood relationships with other girls dramatically affect the rest of her adult life. As previously discussed, Elaine's childhood girlfriends torment her. Her torturous initiation into womanhood has a negative impact on how she views herself as a female and how she relates to other women.

Elaine's relationship with Cordelia, Grace, and Carol not only instructs her on friendships with girls, but also guide her own development as a female. Early in their friendship, Elaine learns that a young girl is expected to critique herself harshly and lavish praise on friends. One of their amusements as children involves cutting women out of catalogues and pasting them into domestic scenarios. They say to one another "Oh, yours is so good. Mine's no good. Mine's *awful*" (*Cat's* 59) every time this game is played. Elaine knows "their voices are wheedling and false; [she] can tell they don't mean it, each one thinks her own lady is good. But it's the thing you have to say, so [she] begins to say it

too” (*Cat’s* 59). Thus Elaine is introduced to the female ritual of measuring oneself against other women and pretending to fall short in order to gain the praise of other women. This seemingly insignificant game teaches Elaine to cut herself down in order to gain the acceptance of others:

I see that there’s a whole world of girls and their doings that has been unknown to me, and that I can be part of it without making any effort at all. I don’t have to keep up with anyone, run as fast, aim as well, make loud explosive noises, decode messages, die on cue. I don’t have to think about whether I’ve done these things well, as well as a boy. All I have to do is sit on the floor and cut frying pans out of the *Eaton’s Catalogue* with embroidery scissors, and say I’ve done it badly. (*Cat’s* 59)

Elaine learns from these girls that it is unacceptable to accomplish anything that makes one stand out from other women. She is taught to believe that to succeed as a female, she must blend in and silence herself. This is something she deals with once again as a successful artist. She is reluctant to showcase her work and admit to her talent.

As she enters adolescence, her perception of women continues to develop negatively. She learns the categories girls can be placed in: “girls can be tough, stuck-up or cheap, mousy or boy-crazy; or they can be brains and sucks and brownnosers if they are thought to study too much” (*Cat’s* 229).

Elaine struggles against these restrictive categories of placement as well as typical teenage rituals. She knows she is expected to “roll [her] eyes in ecstasy” and “groan” in delight over the slightest excitement. But she feels these acts are

“impenetrable and fraudulent” and cannot perform them “without feeling like [she’s] acting” (*Cat’s* 230). She refuses to attend a private all-girls high school because a school with nothing but girls “would be like a trap” (*Cat’s* 237). To Elaine: “there will be no end to imperfection, or to doing things the wrong way. Even if you grow up, no matter how hard you scrub, whatever you do, there will always be some other stain or spot in your face or stupid act, somebody frowning” (*Cat’s* 154). Womanhood and female friends are a weight Elaine struggles with as a direct result of her childhood experiences.

Besides Cordelia and the other girls, Elaine’s childhood instruction on femininity also comes from observing Cordelia’s older sisters, Perdie and Mirrie. These girls embody the stereotypical version of femininity that Elaine sees in advertisements and magazines. They “sit in their room with its twin beds and sprigged-muslin flounces, filing their nails, laughing softly; or they heat brown wax in little pots in the kitchen and take it upstairs to spread on their legs. They look in their mirrors, making sad faces” (*Cat’s* 99). Elaine is not envious of the older girls like her friends are. She does not long to be like Perdie and Mirrie. Rather, Elaine sees becoming a young woman as frightening: “Whatever has happened to them, bulging them, softening them, causing them to walk rather than run, as if there’s some invisible leash around their necks, holding them in check—whatever it is, may happen to us too” (*Cat’s* 99,100).

As an adult, Elaine’s relationships with women are few in number and generally lacking in substance. One of her few intimate encounters with other adult women results from the art class she takes. Once again in a group of

females, Elaine finds herself on the outside, different from the others. She is taking the class to better her artistic talent in order to pursue painting more seriously. However, "none of the [other] girl students wants to be an artist; instead they want to be teachers of art in high schools, or, in one case, a curator in a gallery. Or else they are vague about their wants, which means they intend to get married before any of these other things becomes necessary" (*Cat's* 301). Just as in childhood, Elaine is an outsider, with desires and opinions different from the other females.

As previously mentioned, one of the women from art class is Susie, Josef's other girlfriend. Even though Susie has a powerful impact on her, Elaine does not develop an intimate personal friendship with her. Since both women are involved with Josef at the same time, Elaine learns about Susie from what Josef tells her. Elaine easily recognizes that they are very different women who perceive their respective relationships with Josef in completely different ways. To Elaine, Josef is a sexual being not to be tarnished by thoughts of marriage and domesticity. Susie, on the other hand, pressures Josef to consider marriage which ultimately pushes him away. Assuming she has no one else to turn to when Josef abandons her, Susie calls Elaine, begging her to come over immediately. Elaine finds Susie half-dead after performing a home abortion with a knitting needle. This traumatic event with a woman she barely knows has a profound effect on Elaine. She realizes that Susie is "just a nice girl playing dress up" (*Cat's* 349), who found herself in a situation to which she saw no resolution. Elaine realizes that she could have easily been in Susie's position

and would have “done what she has done, moment by moment, step by step” (*Cat’s* 349). Susie’s botched abortion provides Elaine with yet another example of the desperate measures a woman is willing to take in order to preserve her image and to avoid scandal.

As an adult Elaine attends the increasingly popular consciousness-raising groups. These all-women meetings provide Elaine with a startlingly different view of women in a forum conducive to open conversation and honest opinions. Elaine finds that these women eschew the typical version of femininity she had learned as a child. She is surprised to find other women who also question socially accepted female norms in terms of domesticity and sexuality. Things that she never “consciously thought about before” (*Cat’s* 374) but has always struggled with are being overthrown by these feminist women. Their rage and enthusiasm is “shocking and exciting, to hear such things emerging from the mouths of women. [She] begins to think that women [she] once thought were stupid, or wimps, may simply have been hiding things, as [she] was” (*Cat’s* 375). This is such an important point in Elaine’s relationships with women in general because she is finally able to relate to other women without compromising her inherent values.

Yet, once again, Elaine finds herself alienated from these women in several important ways. She is not a victim of rape, molestation, or workplace inequalities. She feels: “I have not suffered enough, I haven’t paid my dues, I have no right to speak” (*Cat’s* 375). She does not blame men for all her problems nor has she given up men all together and come out as a lesbian as

many women had in order to have “the only equal relationship possible” (*Cat’s* 414). In fact, Elaine is living with her husband and their daughter. During discussions with women in consciousness-raising groups, she feels she is “on shaky ground, in this testifying against men, because [she] lives with one. Women like [her], with a husband, a child, have been referred to with some scorn as *nukes*, for *nuclear family*.” It is implied that “if you stay with the man, whatever problems you are having are your own fault” (*Cat’s* 375). Elaine is once more afraid to speak out for fear of being different from the other women. She realizes that “sisterhood is [still] a difficult concept” for her (*Cat’s* 375).

The most prominent female influence in Elaine’s life continues to be Cordelia. From childhood to adulthood, she is fixated on Cordelia both in reality and in her thoughts and imagination. She often thinks she sees Cordelia walking on the street or in a store. She also recognizes some traits in her daughters that remind her of Cordelia. She thinks: “Cordelia did the same thing, at the same age. The same folded arms, the same immobile face, the blank-eyed stare” (*Cat’s* 219). She does not want to pass on to her daughters the same insecurities and traumas she experienced but she feels that Cordelia continues negatively to influence her life. She is “not afraid of seeing Cordelia. [She is] afraid of being Cordelia” (*Cat’s* 249). The trauma Cordelia inflicted upon Elaine in childhood has remained such an integral part of her life that she fears it defines her.

Part of her journey back to Toronto for her art retrospective involves letting go of Cordelia’s memory and powerful influence. As a child, Elaine believes she

would kill herself if Cordelia asked her to. She hears Cordelia's "kind voice inside [her] head" saying "*Do it. Come on*" (*Cat's* 173). During the dissolution of her marriage to Jon, Elaine actually does attempt suicide at the urging of a voice assumed to be Cordelia's. "It wasn't a frightening voice, in itself. Not menacing but excited, as if proposing an escapade, a prank, a treat. Something treasured, and secret. The voice of a nine-year-old child" (*Cat's* 409). At the end of the novel while in Toronto, Elaine experiences what one assumes to be her last vision of Cordelia and makes peace with her memory:

I know she's looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were.

(*Cat's* 459)

After struggling for years against Cordelia's detrimental influence, Elaine is finally able clearly to see that the faults were never hers; they were Cordelia's projected onto Elaine.

Lady Oracle's protagonist also experiences childhood trauma at the hands of female friends that dramatically impacts her adulthood. As a teenager, her weight means that "[she] could be depended upon not to show envy, not to flirt competitively, and not to wonder why [she] wasn't invited to the mixed-couples parties of these, [her] dearest friends" (*Lady* 91). Joan is not seen as a threat by other women because she is overweight. Rather, the girls view her as a mother

figure and look to her for comfort and advice. She is aware of this but does not try to change the girls' opinions because it is easier than being tormented or overlooked completely.

As an adult, Joan does not have much meaningful interaction with other women. However, one significant event involves a girl from her childhood Brownie troop. At a dinner date with Arthur and another couple, she is introduced to Marlene, and Joan instantly realizes that she already knows her. It is an older girl from Brownies: "[her] tormentor, who'd roped [her] to a bridge and left [her] there, a living sacrifice, for the monster of the ravines" (*Lady* 228). Joan immediately feels "wads of fat sprouting on [her] thighs" and finds herself "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" (*Lady* 228). Her encounter with a person from a difficult point in her childhood immediately takes her back to that time and those painful feelings. Despite the years in between the two events and the many other significant events that occurred during that time, Joan feels as if no time has passed at all and she is once again an overweight young girl being tortured by classmates. "It seems very unjust that an experience so humiliating to [her] hadn't touched [Marlene] at all" (*Lady* 230). Joan is deeply disturbed that an event so prominent in her memory has gone unnoticed by the other person involved.

Joan's main interaction with other women comes through her writing gothic novels. She uses the interaction with her childhood female classmates to her advantage in that she "gained a thorough knowledge of a portion of [her]

future audience: those who got married too young, who had babies too early, who wanted princes and castles and ended up with cramped apartments and grudging husbands" (*Lady* 91). Joan draws on these experiences to make her writing more accessible and real to her audience. She utilizes the experiences and desires she has observed in other women rather than her own personal experiences.

The heroines of [her] books were mere stand-ins: their features were never clearly defined, their faces were putty which each reader could reshape into her own, adding a little beauty. In hundreds of thousands of houses these hidden selves rose at night from the mundane beds of their owners to go forth on adventures so complicated and enticing that they couldn't be confessed to anyone, least of all to the husbands who lay snoring their enchanted snores and dabbling with nothing more recondite than a Playboy Bunny. [She] knows her readers well, [she] went to school with them, [she] was the good sport. (*Lady* 32)

Joan is successful as a gothic writer because she has the ability to understand her female readers' romantic fantasies and desires and translate those into universal stories. She understands that the majority of women want "their men to be strong, lustful, passionate and exciting, with hard rapacious mouths, but also tender and worshipful... they want multiple orgasm... and help with the dishes" (*Lady* 215).

In *The Robber Bride*, female relationships are extremely important to the characters and central to the novel. Tony, Roz, and Charis "don't have much in

common except the catastrophe that brought them together, if Zenia can be called a catastrophe; but over time they've developed a loyalty to one another" (*Robber* 31). As previously discussed, they come from different backgrounds and are three very different women. However, their friendship and support is vital in surviving the wrath Zenia brings to each woman individually as well as other personal difficulties.

Some of the most profound insight into their relationships comes through their descriptions of and comments on one another. Roz describes her comfort with Tony and Charis:

These two women are safe: of everyone she knows, her kids included, these two alone want nothing from her. She can slip her shoes off under the table, she can hold forth and laugh and say whatever she likes, because nothing's being decided, nothing's being demanded; and nothing's being withheld either, because the two of them know everything already. They know the worst. With them, and with them alone, she has no power. (*Robber* 108)

Roz holds a position of power and authority at her job; therefore she finds relief in Tony and Charis who do not expect anything from her. It may appear ironic for a woman who has worked so hard to be successful in a male dominated business to relish being powerless; but Roz needs the time with her friends to let go of everything she must control on a daily basis. Roz admires Tony because she is "always so cool about everything... so matter-of-fact" (*Robber* 109). Due to her childhood experiences, Tony does not have a "mushy desire that everything will

somehow turn out for the best" (*Robber* 109). Roz and Charis often rely on Tony's realism and practicality to keep them grounded in a dramatic situation.

Roz's image is that of a strong, capable woman. She runs the company her father started and her household of three children. She exudes confidence and keeps a tough, forthright exterior to prevent being seen as vulnerable and weak. When Mitch leaves her for Zenia, at first she keeps Tony and Charis "at arms length" because "one touch of their compassion would do her in" (*Robber* 414). However, like Elaine in *Cat's Eye*, Roz becomes active in the consciousness-raising groups popular in the women's movement. She is a high-profile woman; therefore she is welcomed and she is also "ready for the message, having been sandbagged twice already by Mitch and his *things*" (*Robber* 387). After being excluded from other female groups and being poorly treated by her husband, Roz finds comfort in the consciousness-raising groups:

It was like catching up on all the sisters she'd never had, it was like having a great big family in which the members, for once, had something in common; it was like being allowed, finally, into all the groups and cliques she'd never quite been able to crash before. No more mealy-mouth, no more my-hubby-is-better-than-your-hubby, no more beating about the bush! You could say anything! (*Robber* 387)

Besides her friendship with Tony and Charis, this is the first time Roz is accepted by a group of women for exactly who she is.

Tony describes Charis as "what Ophelia would have looked like if she'd lived, or the Virgin Mary when middle-aged—earnest and distracted, and with an

inner light. It's the inner light that gets her in trouble" (*Robber* 30). Charis has never had close female friends because she keeps to herself and does not easily trust others, most likely due to the abuse and molestation she endured as a child. She is an intuitive woman who can accurately predict other people's responses to her eccentric behaviors:

She can picture Augusta's response to this geode. *Mom! What's this hunk of rock doing in your bed?* She can picture Tony's interested skepticism—*Does it really work?*—and Roz's maternal indulgence—*Honey, if it makes you happy I'm all for it!* (*Robber* 59)

Though Charis knows that Roz and Tony are good women and friends, she cannot always let them in on everything in her life. Charis is a very spiritual person and finds comfort in numerous holistic remedies that she does not expect the others to understand. Tony would want concrete evidence and Roz would gently brush her off. Charis knows that Tony has a good heart, "a quality much more important to Charis than Tony's academic brilliance, which was what she was known for" (*Robber* 243). She is able to see past Tony's impenetrable, studious exterior into her inner, caring self.

All three of the women in *The Robber Bride* have mothers who disappoint and even injure them. Therefore, as adult women, they not only become friends, but mother-figures to one another. They help and support one another through difficult times and offer advice and comfort. When Zenia returns, Roz in particular mothers the other two women: "She wants to spread her hen wings over them, reassure them, tell them that everything will be all right, they just have

to be courageous; but these are grown-ups she's dealing with, both of them smarter than she is in their different ways, and she knows they wouldn't believe a word of it" (*Robber* 113). As previously discussed, each woman faces difficulties with relationships with the men in their lives. Every time their respective significant others leaves or disappoints them, the other two women are there to help. For example, when West leaves Tony for Zenia, Roz feeds her grape juice and chicken soup and "rocks her back and forth, back and forth, the most mother that Tony had ever had" (*Robber* 206). The women also mother their men as a way to make up for lost mothering in childhood, but they receive nothing in return. With each other, they are both givers and receivers of motherly care and affection.

While Roz, Tony and Charis find comfort and support in one another, they each mistakenly place their trust in Zenia at some point. Tony's encounter with Zenia takes place during college. Zenia is West's love interest and Tony befriends her while she too becomes interested in him. Tony finds herself confiding in Zenia more than she has ever told another person because Zenia is the first person to take a serious interest in what Tony has to say. Scholarly Tony even goes so far as to write a paper for Zenia because she truly believes they are friends. Unknown to Tony, Zenia is only gaining her trust to use her to toy with West:

Zenia's pattern has been to attack her victims at the point of most vulnerability, and the most vulnerable point is the one most prized, and Tony's most vulnerable point is her brain. That's how she was trapped by

Zenia in the first place: that was the temptation, the bait. Tony got suckered in through her own intellectual vanity. She thought she'd found a friend who was as smart as she was. (*Robber* 447)

Zenia knows how to gain trust from people by identifying their weaknesses and exploiting them. Tony has never had someone who identifies with her; therefore that is where Zenia strikes.

Charis, on the other hand, believes in her healing powers and wants someone to care for, as her grandmother cared for her. Zenia appears on Charis's doorstep looking terribly ill and claiming she is suffering from cancer. It is an opportunity to heal that Charis cannot pass up, despite the stories Tony has told. "It pleases Charis to do these things [for Zenia]; she experiences herself as competent and virtuous, overflowing with good will and good energy. It pleases her to give this energy to someone so obviously in need of it as Zenia" (*Robber* 248). Her boyfriend Billy, however, appears to be angry to have Zenia living in the house. Charis believes he is worried Zenia will tell of his past as a draft dodger. The real reason is that Billy cannot resist Zenia's temptations. After a year of living in Charis's home and seducing Billy, he and Zenia mysteriously disappear. Although before leaving, Zenia cuts the heads off of Charis's beloved pet chickens. As a result, Charis is distraught over Billy's disappearance and turns to Tony for help. Showing her true friendship, Tony comes to Charis's rescue after Zenia hurt Charis as she had hurt Tony.

Despite what she has done to Tony and Charis, a few years later Roz takes Zenia under her wing and gives her a powerful job at her magazine after

Zenia tells her a false story about being unable to make it in the world. Roz, who prides herself on her ability and independence, jumps at the chance to help a fellow woman be successful in her career. Zenia becomes so successful and powerful in the company that Roz eventually feels threatened by her. Her job has always been the one place where Roz is in complete control, and she has jeopardized that position by giving too much power away to Zenia. Not only does Zenia make Roz insecure in her job, but she brings Roz back to her childhood insecurities of not fitting in and her insecurities about keeping Mitch attracted to her: "Sharp as a tack, smart as a whip, and a great figure too, they can never resist adding, causing Roz to go home and frown at her dimpling grapefruit-peel leg skin in the mirror, and then reproach herself for making odious comparisons" (*Robber* 407). Worst of all, Roz's relationship with Zenia temporarily separates the three friends:

Ordinarily if there was something bothering her, something she couldn't quite put her finger on, she'd discuss it with Tony or Charis. But she can't do that, because she's friends with Zenia now, and they might now understand that part of it. They might not understand how Roz could be friends with someone who is—face it—an enemy of theirs. They might see it as betrayal. (*Robber* 408)

Zenia appears to have succeeded in what one assumes to be her ultimate goal: pulling the three friends apart. But her reappearance after her assumed death actually brings Roz, Tony and Charis closer together. Individually they are no

match for Zenia's malicious deeds. Together, with support for each other, they are able to figuratively and literally conquer Zenia.

CONCLUSION

Though Margaret Atwood's body of work covers a wide range of topics and characters, she is at her best when depicting the lives of women. She has the ability to illustrate their emotions and experiences in a way that allows the reader to connect to the characters on a deep level. Atwood creates characters that are universal enough to reach a part of every reader and, at the same time, are so detailed that one feels they know the character personally. On the release of *The Robber Bride*, *The New York Times* wrote:

[Atwood writes] about her characters' inner lives with the sort of authority and assurance usually associated with autobiographical novels. The reader has that sense that she has complete access to her people's emotional histories, complete understanding of their hearts and imaginations. (*Robber*)

This analysis has concentrated on three of Atwood's more popular and female-centered works: *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*. While Atwood generally shies away from admitting to the autobiographical nature of her work, it is easy to see how many characters' experiences can be viewed as autobiographical, particularly in *Cat's Eye*. It is interesting, however, that the reader is also able to connect with the characters. As the protagonist in *Lady Oracle* writes her costume gothic characters with faces of "putty which each reader could reshape into her own" (*Lady* 32), Atwood does the same. The

reader is allowed into the minds and hearts of the characters enough to identify with them, yet enough is left to the imagination to insert one's own ideas and emotions. It is in this way that the reader is able to look inward for answers to the characters' problems and use their experiences to sort out one's own difficulties.

When studied together, the three books provide a complete and in depth view into the lives of women. The common theme of difficult childhood experiences runs throughout all of the characters. Atwood uses the present experiences of the characters mixed in with flashbacks to depict the childhood experiences. This allows the reader to easily connect the consequences of the childhood trauma in the adult life. The characters' childhoods prove to have a profound impact on the reactions to and perceptions of adult situations and other people.

The reader also sees how the women navigate in a world that is not always conducive to their particular needs and desires. Commenting on the protagonist of *Lady Oracle*, Atwood states, "many of her complicated problems are caused... 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). Finding she is not satisfied with the romance and adventure in her own life, Joan depicts these desires in her novels to share with other discontented women. As president of a large corporation, Roz in *The Robber Bride* is also part of a community that is difficult for women to be a part of. The influence of

her childhood as an outsider drives her to work hard to secure a position of power and respect.

Throughout the novels, the main characters endure mistreatment at the hands of both men and other women. Yet it is clear, especially in *The Robber Bride*, the importance of strong bonds and support between women. As young girls, many of the characters yearn for comradeship with other girls. Their lack of true female friends is a prominent issue in their adult lives. In *The Robber Bride*, the three friends have a difficult time trusting one another completely and allowing themselves to be vulnerable to one another. Yet they are always there for one another and eventually discover how much they depend on each other in times of crisis. As a result of Zenia's malicious acts, Roz, Tony and Charis gain the strong bond between women that all the characters search for and all women need.

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