

"MEAT LIKE YOU LIKE IT"

The Production of Identity in Atwood's "Cat's Eye"

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You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight. . . .

— John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (51)

There is never only one, of anyone.

— Elaine, *Cat's Eye* (6)

MMARGARET ATWOOD'S NOVEL *Cat's Eye* is a case study in the pathology of female identity construction in contemporary middle-class Canadian society. Conventional social codes and behaviour are dissected in detail; in the words of one critic, the novel "reads as an anthropological catalogue of the evolution of Toronto's tribal customs from the forties to the eighties" (Manguel 67). Elaine Riskey's first-person narrative in many ways takes the thematic form of a traditional *Bildungsroman*, in which the novel's protagonist undergoes a troubled quest for identity. The difference in Elaine's case is that there is no final resolution to her search, for she is caught in an obsessive cycle that compels her to replay in her mind the fragmented pieces of her childhood in a futile attempt to recover a unified self-image. The structure of the novel reflects the lack of closure to Elaine's dilemma, as past continuously counterpoints present, blurring the traces of any linear development in her self-understanding. Though Elaine builds up defences and becomes acutely aware of the world around her, her psychological development is arrested in a kind of atemporal stasis. What is the cause of Elaine's feelings of loss, of missing a key that would somehow explain the displacement that she has experienced as a result of her traumatic childhood?

I would argue that her fragmented identity is the result of her immersion in a world of contradictory patriarchal discourses, a world governed by an ideology of gender difference that on the one hand creates her as a subject free to pursue her

personal and artistic potential, and on the other constructs her as an object to be judged according to the basest measures of commodity valuation. Elaine's sense of self is lost somewhere in the void between these two antithetical representations. The development of Elaine's character is a dramatic example of the powerful forces of ideological hegemony at work: the patriarchal contradictions she internalizes during childhood are propagated in a universe that is almost exclusively female, a world in which men are perceived either as shadowy, peripheral forces, or as "secret allies" (163) in the struggle against the incomprehensible vagaries of female malevolence. This problematic delineation of the dynamics of girls' and women's relationships raises many questions, especially regarding the extent to which Elaine's general social milieu negatively affects her psychological well being. These two intertwined issues are central to the thematic construction of *Cat's Eye*, and merit further critical exploration.

One of the most obvious contrasts in the novel is the difference in Elaine's psyche before and after she enters mainstream society. Atwood plugs into the traditional romantic discourse of nature equalling innocence: up north, the young Elaine is depicted as being in a kind of pre-linguistic state of grace. She is almost wholly unformed socially, a cultural *tabula rasa*, having parents who are for the most part rather unconventional role models. Elaine is dimly aware of gender differences only as a result of brief encounters with "Dick and Jane" school readers (29). Her innocence becomes naiveté, however, when her idealized image of other girls is rudely exploded by hard experience. She soon misses her earlier nomadic life, the "old rootless life of impermanence and safety" (33) that was paradoxically so much more secure than Toronto the Good, with its stifling middle-class morality. Returning from the north is like coming down from a mountain, "descend[ing] through layers of clarity, of coolness and uncluttered light . . . into the thicker air" (68). Elaine will forever look back at this early period with an idyllic nostalgia: "Until we moved to Toronto I was happy" (21).

When the Risleys move south to the city and Elaine enters school, the process of her gendered identity construction begins in earnest. Elaine is a neophyte in the complex world of real girls, uncomprehending of the codes of behaviour that cause her such grief: "I know the unspoken rules of boys, but with girls I sense that I am always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder" (47). Now among her peers, Elaine enters the discourse of power and weakness that in Michel Foucault's conception is inescapable, for it is "a productive network which runs through the whole social body" (61). The dynamics of patriarchal re-production are omnipresent even at the social level of prepubescent girls. For the power of the dominant class is not a monolithic entity somewhere "out there"; in Louis Althusser's definition, ideology is not something abstract, but is actual *lived experience* that shapes us emotionally and intellectually and forms our responses (39). According to Althusser, the primary function of ideology is control: by "'constituting'

concrete individuals as subjects" (45), the dominant ideology of Western liberalism creates an illusion of individual autonomy and freedom of choice. People "recognize" themselves, construct their identity, in the ways in which ideology "interpellates," or defines, them as subjects, and therefore voluntarily fill the roles given them (55-6). This internalization of patriarchal capitalist ideology is how the "reproduction of the relations of production" (28) are secured: by creating a hegemony that flows through and controls the consciousness of every citizen, the existing dominant socio-economic system generates a self-perpetuating status quo.

THE PROBLEM CONFRONTED BY WOMEN in such a patriarchal tradition, apart from the obvious fact of their second-class status, is, in the view of Simone de Beauvoir, a confusion caused by contradictions in the discourse in which they find themselves positioned. Like men, they are expected to play certain pre-programmed roles that constitute "a set of norms and expectations applied to the incumbent of a particular position" (Banton qtd. in Henriques 22). "Woman" is, however, the target of two mutually-exclusive discourses: on the one hand, she is constructed as an autonomous subject like men are, but on the other hand is burdened by myths of femininity that construct her as the alien, idealized and/or defiled "Other" against which "man" has felt compelled to define himself (69). Woman therefore sees herself "not as a subject but as an object paradoxically endowed with subjectivity" (718). De Beauvoir as a result of this contradiction conceives of woman as "hesitating between the role of *object*, *Other* which is offered her, and the assertion of her liberty" (33). I can think of no better way than this to describe the dilemma in which Elaine Risley finds herself.

As an adult, Elaine has a very individualistic view of the world. She pursues her art as a means of personal expression, caring little for the external inducements of money and fame. She is both disdainful of, and intimidated by, the glitzy superficial hype of commercial galleries. She refuses to be pigeonholed: informed that "[a] lot of people call you a feminist painter" by a trendy, black-clad diva of an interviewer, Elaine warily responds "I hate party lines, I hate ghettos" (90). At the same time as she asserts her individuality, however, the voice that haunts her cuts her down to size: "*Your clothes are stupid. Your art is crap. Sit up straight and don't answer back*" (91). This voice that echoes in her head is the voice of patriarchal ideology, which, while constituting Elaine as an "independent" subject, also requires her to play the role of the weak, subordinate woman in society. In her gendered subject/objectivity, Elaine is a parody of the Cartesian *cogito*, for though she can *think*, her *being* is fragmented. The process of fragmentation began the first day Elaine went to school, and thereby entered the realm of social technologies — or to use Althusser's terminology, "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISAs) — whose function it is to control the population.

Foucault proposes a similar conception of social technologies that exist to “normalize” the populace (206). One of the most effective of these institutions is school discipline, which in his view “succeed[s] in making children’s bodies the object of highly complex systems of manipulation and conditioning” (67). Mrs. Lumley, aided by the intimidating pictures of the King and Queen, is the central instrument of formalized oppression in the social microcosm of Elaine’s classroom: she “rules by fear” (78). Her “dark, mysterious, repulsive” bloomers make her even more terrifying, for they represent a clue to the unspoken reasons why the children of St. Mary’s are divided *en masse* into the categories BOYS and GIRLS. The underwear of a grown woman somehow speaks of the strange hidden mixture of shame and potency that femininity increasingly signifies to the girls:

They’re sacrosanct, at the same time holy and deeply shameful. Whatever is wrong with them may be wrong with me also, because although Miss Lumley is not what anyone thinks of as a girl, she is also not a boy. When the brass handbell clangs and we line up outside our GIRLS door, whatever category we are in also includes her. (81)

Female sexuality is a threatening force to be denied, and, when it surfaces, to be shamed into repression. This communal fear is manifested in the reaction to the murder in the ravine of a young girl, who *dared* let herself be “molested” and killed: “It’s as if this girl has done something shameful, herself, by being murdered. So she goes to that place where all things go that are not mentionable” (241).

Far from trying to mitigate the hypocrisy of such warped double standards, mothers are complicit in this conspiracy of silence: “There’s a great deal they don’t say. Between us and them is a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down. It’s filled with wordlessness” (93). Elaine later realizes, as a mother herself, that this guilt is not so cut and dried, for in many ways their mothers’ hands were tied by strict social taboos (157). Like Cordelia’s adolescent sisters Perdie and Mirrie, there was “some invisible leash around their necks, holding them in check” (93).

The adult Elaine can, however, find little excuse for the power that was wielded by Mrs. Smeath. Mrs. Smeath’s personality reads like a checklist of the “contrasting Virtues” whose inculcation into the general populace Althusser believes is the primary goal of ISAs: she is the very embodiment of “modesty, resignation, submissiveness on one hand, cynicism, contempt, arrogance, confidence, self-importance, even smooth talk and cunning on the other” (Althusser 30). Mrs. Smeath, in condoning the torment that Elaine is forced to undergo, becomes for the young girl both the hypocrisy and the watchful vigilance of her society: “Her bad heart floats in her body like an eye, an evil eye, it sees me” (180).

That Mrs. Smeath is a paradigm of bourgeois morality is made clear when the adult Elaine has her first public showing as a member of the “F(OUR) FOR ALL’ feminist collective. Mrs. Smeath is incarnated in acrylic as *The White Gift*, which in childhood seemed to Elaine to be “blank, sinister bundles of tissue paper

... made uniform, bleached of their identity and colours" (124). Mrs. Smeath (and her replacement, daughter Grace) is interchangeable with millions of middle-class matrons just like her, a point underlined by the fact that as a stock character she is mistaken for the indignant woman who throws ink on Elaine's painting (352-3). By painting Mrs. Smeath, compulsively, over and over, Elaine seems to be trying to come to terms with the patriarchal guilt she has internalized herself: "She looks out at me from the flat surface of paint, three-dimensional now, smiling her closed half-smile, smug and accusing. Whatever has happened to me is my own fault, the fault of what is wrong with me. Mrs. Smeath knows what it is. She isn't telling" (338).

Though the female world of imposed limits over which Mrs. Smeath holds dominion is in some ways self-reproducing, it is ultimately controlled by men, represented by fathers, who as the final repository of discipline hold a mysterious and threatening power of sanction: "... daytime is ruled by mothers. But fathers come out at night. Darkness brings home the fathers, with their real, unspeakable power" (164). The problem with ascribing final blame to individual men for Elaine's oppression is that in Elaine's experience, males are the least of her worries. Her brother is her first ally, teaching her to trust her instincts and to "see in the dark" (26). Confronted later by the dogma of a feminist group, Elaine rationalizes her discomfort: "Sisterhood is a difficult concept for me, I tell myself, because I never had a sister. Brotherhood is not" (345). In high school, her "relationships with boys are effortless"; "it's girls I feel I have to defend myself against; not boys" (237). She "knows things about boys," understands the macho roles they are forced to play (238), and, sharing in their silence, feels a mutual need to escape peer pressure together to "desert islands, momentary, unreal, but there" (237). Her attraction is visual, aesthetic, and physical. Boys for her are objects of fascination, bodies of "pure energy, solidified light" (240).

Elaine's preference in men changes from such stumbling teenage boys, to brooding angst-ridden Byronic types, and finally to her husband Ben, whose reassuring strength seems to epitomize the traditional male stereotype. Men always seem, however, peripheral to the real issues of Elaine's life.

Her art teacher Josef is a walking catalogue of patriarchal myths of femininity: he feels women should live for him only (305), and has an objectivizing, Pre-Raphaelite vision of women as "helpless flowers, or shapes to be arranged and contemplated" (318). He is a demon-lover of the Heathcliff variety, and though Elaine is initially attracted by his mystery, she comes to see through "his secrecy and his almost-empty rooms, and his baleful memories and bad dreams" (297). Her ex-husband Jon had similar "cloudy-headed notions about women" (404), but she now feels as if she shares a common bond with him, as if they were both veterans of the same long-past war (266). Though speculating that men's new knowledge of their own fallible humanity has perhaps made them "trickier, slyer,

more evasive, harder to read," Elaine concludes that "[f]orgiving men is so much easier than forgiving women" (267). Men are depicted as a kind of inert but dangerous natural phenomenon, around which women must try to pick their way carefully (268). Not being conscious, men can no more be blamed for harm than a sharp rock; in Elaine's allegorical painting, three *Falling Women* plummet down into the ravine onto men who are "lying unseen, jagged and dark and without volition, far below" (268).

Women, however, cannot plead ignorance as a defence, for women "know too much, they can neither be deceived nor trusted" (379). Women, with their "hard, legitimate judgments" (378), are an unknown, threatening quantity to Elaine. The fissures in her identity are produced in a world inhabited predominantly by women. Though the spectre of male domination looms dimly on the horizon (or in the ravines), the forces that distort and weaken Elaine's confidence and place her in a contradictory subject-position are overwhelmingly female.

THE MOST EFFECTIVE AGENT in young Elaine's indoctrination is, of course, Cordelia. Cordelia functions as the "conscience" of the patriarchal status quo, insidiously undermining Elaine's self-confidence: "*What do you have to say for yourself?* Cordelia used to ask. *Nothing*, I would say. It was a word I came to connect with myself, as if I was nothing, as if there was nothing there at all" (41). Cordelia's voice invades Elaine's consciousness, filling her with criticism and self-doubt. The whole universe sits in judgment on her; even the stars now "look watchful" (101). Even as an adult, Elaine cannot escape the voice that reappears in moments of stress, echoing in her head, commanding her to conform, or entreating her to self-destruct — most dramatically when Elaine slits her wrist with an Exacto knife (373-4).

True to de Beauvoir's conception, Cordelia uses Elaine in the classic patriarchal pattern of projecting what one is trying to escape/reject within oneself onto an "Other." Elaine rapidly internalizes Cordelia's insecurity, and the malice it generates. The effects of this influence are long-lasting: after Susie's botched abortion attempt, Elaine's feelings of compassion are cut off by "a small, mean voice, ancient and smug, that comes from somewhere deep inside my head: *It serves her right*" (321).

Trapped by Cordelia's incessant torment, the young Elaine's fantasies turn to self-erasure: "I think about becoming invisible," about eating poison berries, drinking Javex, jumping off the bridge (155). She learns less drastic methods of escape by filling her head with music, and by fainting almost at will. The split in her personality reaches its final stage when, after fainting, she actually mentally flees her body: "I'm seeing all this from above, as if I'm in the air, somewhere near the GIRLS

sign over the door, looking down like a bird" (172). Elaine has internalized the perspective of the "Watchbird," the embodied voice of patriarchal censure (138), and is the victim of a split identity as a result.

Only up north can Elaine find a way to bridge what is, in the terms of Lacanian psychology, a "gap between the conscious self and the self presented in discourse" (Belsey 65). Like one of her brother's butterflies, she can for a time shed the cocoon of language that has both constructed and constricted her in the city. Here she can be free of the subject/object discourse, and therefore temporarily escape from being judged, from judging herself:

I've begun to feel not gladness, but 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 back into the rhythms of transience as if into bed. (143)

This reversion to a pre-linguistic state is, of course, necessarily a fleeting illusion, for Elaine has already become immersed in the semiotic structure that signifies her as female, and therefore as a "site of contradiction" (Belsey 65). She has already passed through Lacan's "mirror-phase," in which the child "perceives itself as other, an image, exterior to its own perceiving self, [which thus] necessitates a splitting between the *I* which is perceived and the *I* which does the perceiving" (Belsey 64). The fact that images of mirrors and reflections abound in *Cat's Eye*, and are a dominant motif in Elaine's paintings as well as in her inner life (e.g. 327, 408), underscores the possible symbolic significance of this psychoanalytic metaphor. Toronto itself functions as an ISA in the reinforcement of Elaine's negative self-image, for "it still has power; like a mirror that shows you only the ruined half of your face" (410).

As Elaine's childhood feelings of fragmentation increase, she turns to self-mutilation as a means of grounding herself in reality: the pain of pulling strips of flesh from her feet "was something to hold onto" (114). This compulsion stays with her long past childhood; living with Jon years later, Elaine is plagued by the same disorder: "Every move I make is sodden with unreality. When no one is around, I bite my fingers. I need to feel physical pain, to attach myself to daily life. My body is a separate thing" (338). When she returns to Toronto for the retrospective of her works (and life), Elaine begins chewing her fingers again, for blood is "a taste I remember" (9). In an image that echoes that of the hacked-up female mannequins Jody uses in her graphically anti-sexist "MEAT LIKE YOU LIKE IT" exhibition, Elaine feels as disembodied as she did in *Grade Five*: "I tuck myself into my clothes, handling my arms and legs as if they're someone else's" (42).

Cordelia's criticism has forced Elaine to be unsure of every move she makes. Only her cat's eye, with its "impartial gaze," has the ability to protect her from the

disjuncting effect this brainwashing has had on her psyche: "With the help of its power I retreat back into my eyes" (155). That the marble "so blue, so pure" (141) offers a promise of recovered wholeness becomes even more apparent when Elaine has a vision in which the heart of the Virgin Mary resembles the red plastic purse in which she stores her glass talisman (184). Soon after, she has the experience that marks the turning point in her power relations with Cordelia: left to freeze in the dark ravine, she is rescued by the glowing-hearted Virgin, who like the cat's eye protects her, "wrapping me in warmth and painlessness" (190). This dark, cloaked lady is the Virgin "of lost things, one who restored what was lost" (198).

IRONICALLY, the symbolic meaning of this crisis is one of the lost keys to self-understanding that haunt the older Elaine, who feels compelled to one of the lost keys to self-understanding that haunt the older Elaine, who feels compelled to fill in the missing pieces of her past: "I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia," she ventures, "I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I've forgotten when" (227). After her encounter with the mysterious Virgin, young Elaine gains the strength to walk away from Cordelia (193), but at what cost? As she enters Grade Six, her recent past is obliterated: "Time is missing" (201). She has absorbed the power of the cat's eye, and she cannot be touched: "I no longer need them. I am indifferent to them. There's something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass" (193).

Elaine has switched places with Cordelia, and assumed all of the mental problems of her alter ego. She feels detached from her peers as she begins high school (207), and cannot fit in socially "without feeling I'm acting" (209). Mocking her mother's trite expression, she observes "I am happy as a clam: hard-shelled, firmly closed" (201). Elaine develops a "mean mouth" as a way of both covering up her insecurity, and pushing the limits of the socially acceptable (234-5). She cannot, however, escape the self-objectification that is the legacy of Cordelia, patriarchal ideology's prepubescent *agent provocateur*: "I can't believe in my own sadness, I can't take it seriously. I watch myself in the mirror, intrigued by the sight of tears" (208).

Elaine and Cordelia become one another's elusive *doppelgänger*, representing the disparate parts of each other's fragmented identity. Elaine realizes after her disturbing high school visit to Cordelia's house that her old nemesis "has expected something from me, some connection to her old life, or to herself" (259). Elaine, in turn, seeks the same connection years later during her visit to Toronto:

There are things I need to ask her. Not what happened, back then in the time I lost, because now I know that. I need to ask her why. If she remembers. . . .

She will have her own version. I am not the centre of her story, because she herself is that. But I could give her something you can never have, except from another person: what you look like from outside. A reflection. This is the part of herself I could give back to her.

We are like twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key. (411)

Does Elaine find a resolution to what can be seen as her search for unity? She certainly comes to terms with some of the demons of her past. She now sees that Mrs. Smeath — who in her paintings is “bigger than life, bigger than she ever was. Blotting out God”—was a “displaced person” too (404-5). Elaine regrets not having tried to understand Mrs. Smeath’s own position of being trapped in “a small-town threadbare decency.” She could have in her portrayal gone for “justice”; she admits that “Instead I went for vengeance.” Elaine realizes that Mrs. Smeath was as much a victim of patriarchal ideology as she herself was. Malice just propagates the ignorance: “an eye for an eye leads only to more blindness” (405).

Similarly, Elaine exorcizes the ghost of Cordelia’s torment, now seeing clearly that the flaws for which she suffered guilt were never hers at all:

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 own emotions any more. They are Cordelia’s; as they always were. (419)

In a scene echoing the visitation of the Virgin, Elaine absolves Cordelia of all past sins. Whether Elaine’s final forgiveness of her childhood persecutors brings a kind of closure to her story is left unclear, for the facts of her gendered subjectivity remain the same. The only true escape she finds is in her art. Of course, the liberation she finds in painting is a result of its “irrelevance” in the eyes of Jon (the voice of contemporary aesthetic patriarchy): “There is freedom in this: because it doesn’t matter what I do, I can do what I like” (346). What Elaine finally misses most is the similar freedom she was hoping to share with Cordelia when, no longer valued as sexual objects by the patriarchal system, they could let loose like the old ladies they used to see on the streetcar who “have a certain gaiety to them, a power of invention,” who “don’t care what people think,” and who “have escaped, though what it is they’ve escaped from isn’t clear to us” (5). In their telling youthful dream of the future, Elaine and Cordelia only hope that “when the time comes we will also be free to choose” (5).

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HANDS SURPRISED AS STARFISH

for J. age 5½

Zoë Landale

Every day you make me art
 fresh from your smelly markers
 cinnamon & strawberry fragrant.
 Wherever I sit
 I have heaps of happy stories beside me
 two cardboard boxes in the basement, stuffed,
 houses with ears, mummas, daddies & babies.
 Yesterday I taped five new families
 to the side of my word-processor.
 Today I sit beside my machine,
 chew my pen, disconsolate,
 my colours are not going well.
 I look over to your red & purple
 & turquoise hands straggling, waving.
 The hands you make, surprised
 as starfish
 get me every time.
 Something about the way they flourish open:
 my own hands don't dare to hope
 for so much.
 Yours are knee-level
 cheerful.
 I have to smile back
 at them. Expectant, they demand
 good nature.
 An ocean's worth.