

MARGARET THE MAGICIAN

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WHEN THE DART is an icicle aimed right between your eyes it is difficult to separate the magic from the magician. Reading the novels and poetry of Margaret Atwood is an intensely personal experience which culminates in a confrontation with the ubiquitous image of the poet on the back cover of the book. It is always the same. The eyes stare out hypnotic from the pale mask surrounded by her furry camouflage.

The photograph is a positive of the negative printed on every page, like an avenging angel in the snow. The used words subside like snowflakes as Atwood, the magician, hypnotizes with the brilliant image which dazzles without illuminating. The hypnotic subject participates involuntarily in a grotesque, dances without knowing the steps. There is nothing shared in the experience of manipulation. The puppet learns nothing of itself or of the puppeteer.

The refusal to be known, except as female god or witch doctor is articulated in the motif of invisibility as the Atwood persona struggles to extricate herself from personal relationships. Like the extraterrestrial cliché of popular science fiction, she cannot feel, exists only to comment. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist "prayed to be made invisible, and when in the morning everyone could still see me I knew they had the wrong god." She is always the outsider, existing only to shatter the illusions of her fellow beings.

When the ice-woman is touched with fire, she simply melts away. The lovers of the novels and the poetry are left groping the air for a phantom that will not say "I love you," but will simply observe the lover under the microscope. *Power Politics*, the latest book of poems, is a liturgy for the funeral of romantic love:

Around my neck I wear
the head of the beloved, pressed
in the metal retina like a picked flower.

Physical love is cold and unpleasant, war orchestrated by the sound of finger-

nails on blackboards. In *The Edible Woman*, Marion copulates in the bathtub with her fiancé and later runs away, an objective correlative for her emotional withdrawal. The only successful encounter occurs in *Surfacing*, where the lover is taken outside and transformed into an animal so that she might give birth by herself to her own image:

The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with a shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words.

Childbearing is usually a repulsive feminine function. Marion, in *The Edible Woman*, subscribes to a classic psychiatric phenomenon. Her refusal to eat is a rejection of the function of motherhood. Atwood's words reek of formaldehyde as images of pickled fetuses dangle like a gold watch from the hand of the magician, whose power struggle with men is simply a foil for her pervasive misanthropy. There is no compassion for the women who are victims either. The landladies, the pregnant friends, and the bleached and perfumed fatalities of feminine conditioning are littered like lipstick stained kleenexes about her imaginary landscape.

The woman at the centre of her universe is numb. She cannot feel and she cannot give. The value of her existence lies in observation. What is lacking is the humanity which will tie the brilliant impressions together. The magician is left with only the tricks. Where there is no feeling, there is no ultimate reality;

Pleasure and pain are side by side they said but most of the brain is neutral; nerveless, like fat. I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it.

Although a wearer of masks herself, the author rejects words as an impediment to reality. The world stripped of emotions and words is left visual and tactile and this is where Margaret Atwood finds her real strength. Her poems are petroglyphs indelibly printed on the brain. It is the image which persists when the words, often cruel and bitter, subside. Words are a substitute for and distortion of her world, which is silent and concerned only with survival and the passing seasons. One of the reasons *The Edible Woman* fails as a novel is the awkwardness of the dialogue. Atwood is self conscious in the urban environment which requires language. There is little dialogue in *Surfacing* to disturb the sounds of the country and this is one of the strengths of the more mature novel.

There is no warmth in the natural world where she takes refuge, only a lack of hypocrisy. Atwood, the observer, knows she has no control over the northern landscape she describes as no one else does and she admires its proud refusal to submit, except to death. In spite of her identification with animals, the fur coats, the leather jackets and startled grace, the Atwood persona is left to salvage what she can of the human condition. She knows a language and is burdened with a personal and social history. She cannot be animal. In *Surfacing*, she proves her dependance upon society. She cannot live alone in the wilderness.

The magician, masked in theatrics, is still a part of history and the interlocking mesh of human membrane. The detachment is another illusion. Even the rejection of the life-giving function cannot negate the reality of her own parents. This is the problem of *Surfacing*, where the dead parents have more credibility than the living friends, and of "An Attempted Solution for Chess Problems" in *The Circle Game*;

The shadows of the chessmen
stretch, fall across her: she
is obsessed by history;
each wooden totem rises
like the cairn of an event

The cold eye of the hypnotist wavers when "inherited events barnacle on the mind."

There is a pervasive chill in her imagery. Death is cold. Love is cold. Snow is cold. The lack of a warming counterpoint in her work is the failure of compassion in the characters who dance in an involuntary circle around her ice-woman. No one is strong enough to challenge her supremacy at the centre of the universe and this is a weakness, as her voice becomes too strident, losing conviction. There is no dialogue on any level.

There is no life-giving warmth in her metaphorical water either. The ascent from drowning is no resurrection, just a return to conventional reality. In or out of the water, the drowned soul persists. Even life in the womb is surreal, grotesque. There is no state of innocence and there is no state of grace. The nightmare overcomes the dream. There is no escape. The fiction is a glassy mirror to cold realities.

The poet is the agent of beauty and the sharp instrument of death. She is a knife cutting through onion. Each layer falls away in beautiful symmetry. But there is no relationship between the layers and the centre is hollow.