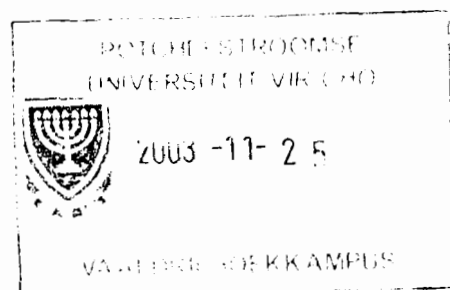




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Margaret Atwood: Challenging the unity of the body
and the text

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MARGARET ATWOOD: CHALLENGING THE UNITY OF THE BODY AND THE TEXT

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood is an internationally read, translated, and critiqued writer whose novels have established her as one of the very best writers in English (McCombs, 1988:1). The subject of critical studies on her works deal mainly with notions of identity from psychoanalytical perspectives. This study has identified a gap in current critical studies on Atwood's works, namely to establish affinities between notions of identity and notions of textual identity.

The theoretical perspective of this study is informed by theories of French feminist critics Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, while keeping in mind some of the key ideas of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. The theories of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva have affinities with Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*. These theories are applied to the characters of *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*, in order to deconstruct stereotypes of the virgin, the wife and the mother. These stereotypes are based upon binary oppositions, and if binary oppositions are deconstructed, then stereotypes are invalid. This study investigates the manner in which Atwood deconstructs stereotypes of the virgin, the wife and the mother, and also shows that attempts to conform to these stereotypes may lead to a fragmentation of subjectivity.

In order to investigate the affinities between Atwood's questioning of the unity of the subject, and the postmodern questioning of textual unity, Roland Barthes's notion of the death of the author will be applied to *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*. It is shown that if the author of the text – the final signified – is eliminated, the text becomes fragmentary and open. The text becomes unstable, it displays an absence of hierarchical textual levels, and it becomes intertextual. Based on an analysis of the fragmentary nature of the character's identities according to theories by Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, and an analysis of the fragmentary nature of Atwood's text in the light of Roland Barthes's notion of the death of the author, affinities between challenging orthodox notions of selfhood and the text will be established.

OPSOMMING

Margaret Atwood se werke is internasionaal gelees, vertaal en gekritiseer en haar werke vestig haar as een van die beste skrywers in Engles (McCombs, 1988:1). Die onderwerp van kritiese studies oor haar werke handel hoofsaaklik oor die konsep van identiteit, vanuit n' psigoanalitiese perspektief. Hierdie studie identifiseer dus n' gaping in huidige akademiese studies wat handel oor Atwood se werke, naamlik die vestiging van ooreenkomste tussen konsepte van identiteit en konsepte van tekstuele identiteit.

Die teoretiese perspektief van die studie is ingelig deur die teorieë van Franse feministiese kritici, in spesifiek Hélène Cixous en Julia Kristeva, terwyl sleutel idees van Sigmund Freud en Jacques Lacan ingedagte gehou word. Die teorieë van Hélène Cixous en Julia Kristeva toon ooreenkomste met Jacques Derrida se konsep van *différance*, in spesifiek die moontlikheid dat betekenis vloeiend is in die signifikasie sisteem. Die identiteite van die karakters in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* en *The Blind Assassin* word bespreek in die lig van hierdie teorieë met die doel om die stereotipes van die vrou, die moeder en die maagd te dekonstrueer. Hierdie stereotipes is gebaseer op binêre opposisies. Die dekonstruksie van binêre opposisies beteken dat stereotipes blootgestel kan word as onjuis.

Hierdie studie ondersoek Margaret Atwood se dekonstruksie van die stereotipes van die vrou, die moeder en die maagd, en toon dat pogings om te konformeer aan hierdie stereotipes lei tot n' verbrokkeling van subjektiwiteit.

Die tweede deel van hierdie studie is gebaseer op Roland Barthes se konsep van die dood van die outeur. Dit is bewys dat die verwydering van die outeur – die finale betekenis van die teks – tot gevolg het dat die teks ontvanklik word. n' Ontvanklike teks is onstabiel, dit toon n' afwesigheid van hierargiese tekstuele vlakke en dit is intertekstueel.

Gebaseer op die analisering van die fragmentêre identiteit en die analisering van die fragmentêre teks in Atwood se werke, ooreenkomste tussen die uitdaging van ortodokse konsepte van subjektiwiteit en die teks sal daargestel word.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Contextualisation and statement of the problem

The Canadian author Margaret Atwood is one of the major contemporary writers in English. According to Ingersoll (1990), her works can be located at the centre of the Postmodern debate about identity. She is an "extraordinarily good writer who has produced widely different books ... and possesses an unusual combination of wit and satirical edge", a fine critical intelligence and "technique in plenty" (Piercy, 1982:53). The numerous awards Atwood has received since the nineteen sixties bear testimony to the relevance of her writings as well as to her central position within contemporary literature and the literary debate. Her novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993) and *Alias Grace* (1996) were short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize, which she received in 2001 for her tenth novel, *The Blind Assassin* (2000). Not only is she an acclaimed author, but she is also a critic and academic. Her most recent work of criticism, *Negotiating with the Dead*, appeared in 2002 and her most recent work of fiction *Oryx and Crake* was published in May 2003.

Margaret Atwood's works have been the subject of a substantial number of critical studies, articles, essays, books and dissertations. These studies deal with identity, gender roles, the body and power politics and they include several critical approaches to the concept of identity. Hengen, for instance, investigates the notion of power as a phenomenon defined by broader social structures in *Margaret Atwood's Power: Mirrors, Reflections and Images in Select Fiction and Poetry* (1993). Similarly, *The Handmaid's Tale: Margaret Atwood* (1999), edited by Dvorak looks at notions of ideology and power. Notions of identity and the split subject have also been investigated from a psychoanalytical perspective by Mycak in *In Search Of The Split Subject: Psychoanalysis, Phenomenology And the Novels Of Margaret Atwood* (1996). Bouson analyses her works both from feminist and a psychoanalytic perspective in *Brutal Choreographies* (1993). In *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale*

Sexual Politics (1993) Wilson identifies fairy-tale motifs and archetypes in Atwood's works.

On the whole, critics seem to be mainly concerned with sexual politics and identity. But, to my knowledge, only one study has been devoted to Atwood's deconstruction of orthodox notions of selfhood and the text, namely Rao's *Strategies for Identity* (1993). Despite the large number of critical studies, no other work has, to my knowledge, focused on the relationship between feminist and poststructuralist notions of selfhood and the text.

In my opinion, the fragmentation of the unified subject and the body has noticeable affinities with the fragmentation of the unity of the text.

According to Roland Barthes (1986), identity is lost when writing begins, and "the death of the author" is the inevitable result of the entropy of meaning.

Best and Kellner (1991:3-5) argue that Postmodern society is characterised by new models of subjectivity, cultural fragmentation and changes in experience of space and time. Postmodern theory abandons the rational unified subject postulated by much modernist theory in favour of a socially and linguistically decentred and fragmented subject. The new conception of subjectivity has explicit affinities with the challenge of the rationalist need for meaning, order and unity. Hassan (1975) also links the entropy of meaning and the diffusion of the ego, arguing that their common cause is an absent centre. Similarly, McHale (1987:10 & 26) states that the Postmodern experience stems from a profound sense of ontological uncertainty, where neither the world nor the self possesses unity, coherence and meaning. Instead, identity and meaning are radically decentred. As Hassan observes, this decentring is the result of an absent centre or of the fragmentation of the unity of the sign.

According to Jacques Derrida (1978:278-281), structure - which implies unity - always has a given centre (arche, telos or eidos) or a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this centre is not only to orient, balance, and organise, but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. The concept of a centred structure is, in fact, the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of play. On the basis of

this ontological certitude, anxiety can be mastered. Sarup (1993:33-34) states that since the relation between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, there is no transcendental or privileged signified and the domain or play of signification henceforth has no limit. Signifiers keep transforming into signifieds, and vice versa, and one never arrives at a final signified which is not a signifier itself. Meaning and identity are thus inherently unstable. It is this instability that Postmodernism is concerned about. The loss of unity, coherence and meaning of Postmodern texts, are also recurrent themes Atwood's works.

According to Hoesterey (1999:217), Postmodernism represents the shift from monism to pluralism; from representation, which implies unity and stability, to performance that is transient and fluid. It seems that the fragmented nature of the sign, the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified could serve to undermine "fixed" categories, and lead to the recognition that there is no gender behind the expressions that are said to be its result. Butler (1992) views identity as a signifying practice, and argues that gender is something we *do*. Like all signifying practices, gender roles are arbitrary and its truth-value dependant upon repetition. If there is no innate gender behind its expressions, then it follows that stereotypes could be challenged and subverted. Savitt (1982) argues that historically, women have been portrayed in literature as characters confined mainly to three main or "core" stereotypes: the wife, the mother and the virgin. Ferguson (1986:8) elaborates that there are also other stereotypes, such as sisters, grandmothers, aunts, but the more frequent ones, the wife, the mother, and the virgin are closely related to a woman's perceived biological roles. These stereotypes are male constructions of the feminine, imitated and internalised by women. Ferguson (1986:6) agrees with Savitt that the problem with most images of women in literature is that they are largely male representations. Subversion is possible if alternatives are acted out and performed. Ferguson (1986:5) argues that literature both reflects and helps create one's views of reality and therefore stereotypes of women shape one's *Weltanschauung*, as well as one's self. If literature is a reflection of reality, then women's changing roles, exemplified in the characters of Margaret Atwood, are a challenging area of investigation.

According to Rao (1993), it is only recently that critics contextualized Atwood's fiction within the parameters of Postmodern writing. Therefore, this gap in current scholarly research could be addressed by looking at the author's deconstruction of gender stereotypes in the general framework of Postmodernism, with specific reference to the notion of split subjectivity and the unstable nature of meaning and the text.

Since changing notions of identity in the works of Atwood - *The Edible Woman* (1969), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000) - are mirrored in the fragmentation of meaningful textual and bodily identity in Postmodern discourse, the following questions emerge:

- What mechanisms for constructing gender stereotypes, challenged by Postmodern can be identified in critical writings?
- What are the gender stereotypes that Atwood deconstructs?
- How are body and identity affected by these gender stereotypes in Atwood's texts, *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*?
- Are there any affinities between Atwood's deconstruction of notions of the unified subject in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* and the rejection of meaningful textual and bodily identity in Postmodern discourse?.

1.2 Aims

The aims of this study, from the research questions, are firstly to describe how Margaret Atwood deconstructs gender stereotypes, in *The Edible Woman* (1969), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and *The Blind Assassin* (2000), locating these attempts in the general framework of Postmodernist re-evaluation of notions of textual and bodily representations. In particular, this study will try:

- To determine the gender stereotypes that Atwood deconstructs in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*.
- To determine the fragmenting influence of gender stereotypes on body and identity in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*.

- To determine the affinities (if any) between Atwood's deconstruction of notions of the unified subject in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*, and the rejection of meaningful textual and bodily identity in Postmodern discourse.

1.3 Methods

In order to achieve the above aims, this study will concentrate on the following aspects:

- The mechanisms employed for constructing gender stereotypes, challenged by Postmodern literature, will be identified by means of a literature survey, focussing on the relationship (if any) between dualist thought and patriarchy (Eagleton, 1996; Kristeva, 1986), and that of language and sexism (Spender, 1981).
- It was decided to focus on three key texts by Atwood; *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*, which will form the basis of an analysis of Atwood's deconstruction of gender stereotypes. In specific, the role of the virgin, the wife and the mother will be focussed upon.
- The subsequent fragmenting effect of gender stereotypes that Atwood deconstructs will be investigated in these three texts. This will be done by means of a focus on the fragmentation of body and identity of certain characters in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*.
- Finally, the study will attempt to determine the affinities between Atwood's deconstruction of notions of the unified subject in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*, and the decentring of meaningful textual and bodily identity in Postmodern discourse by comparing both Atwood's and Postmodernism's deconstruction of the aspects identified in chapter two, namely, dualist thought and language, to the specific manifestations in Atwood's work discussed in chapter three and four.

1.4 Limitations

This study will be limited to three key novels in Atwood's *oeuvre*: *The Edible Woman* (1969), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and *The Blind Assassin* (2000). These three novels are fundamental in any discussion about the deconstruction of the feminine body and identity and the fragmentation of the text. *The Edible Woman*, her first novel, already contains most of the themes that are developed in her later novels, such as the rejection of gender stereotypes, multiple subjectivity and the fragmented body. Similarly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, gender stereotypes, the fragmentation of the woman's body and the text are examined and challenged. Atwood's latest novel, *The Blind Assassin* (2000), arguably her most complex and ambitious novel to date, can be seen as a converging point for all her previous preoccupations with the construction and deconstruction of the woman's body and identity as well as the text.

Chapter 2

POSTMODERNIST LITERATURE AND GENDER STEREOTYPES

2.1 The critical perspective

The critical perspective will highlight the role that binary oppositions play in the creation of gender stereotypes. Dualist thought seems to be the basis of patriarchal thought and language, and subsequently causes a reality that consists of stereotypes. This chapter will mainly draw on Hélène Cixous's and Dale Spender's analysis of patriarchal thought.

2.1.1 Dualist thought

In order to explain how Margaret Atwood criticises patriarchal values in her works, it is important to outline the characteristics of binary thinking and binary oppositions.

Contemporary Feminist theory has explored the concept of binary thinking¹, that is, the predilection to construct the world in terms of oppositions - for example, good and evil, male and female. Thought, according to the French Feminist critic Hélène Cixous, has always worked through opposition. Mary Eagleton (1996:146) points out that feminists have often found the subject of dualism relevant because they believe that binary thinking upholds patriarchy. The subversion or rejection of the binary tradition could create alternative spaces for the articulation of multiple subjectivities. Hélène Cixous's analysis of "patriarchal binary thought" is as follows: activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, day/night, head/emotion, and logos/pathos (Cixous and Clément, 1982:115).

The above oppositions correspond to the underlying opposition man/woman and are deeply immersed in the patriarchal value system: each opposition can be analysed as a hierarchy where the "feminine" side is seen as the negative, powerless instance. According to Cixous (Cixous and Clément, 1982:118),

¹ Binary thought dates back to the sixth century B.C. with the teachings of Zoroaster. It is also prominent in the third century A.D. with the rise of Manicheism. The Pythagoreans, who developed ten points of opposites, such as odd and even, male and female, took up the theory in early Greek philosophy. In modern philosophy, the most influential dualism has been Descartes' opposition between mind and matter.

“either woman is passive or she doesn't exist”. The superior term in these oppositions belongs to presence and logos (i.e. an essence or truth), and the inferior term serves to define its status and marks its fall (Sarup, 1993:38). Best and Kellner (1991:207) assert that these are strategic oppositions which privilege men in the superior position of the hierarchy and women in the inferior position, as the second sex. They also note that such ideological discourses, which date back to Plato and Aristotle, justify the domination of women by men.

Cixous (in Eagleton, M., 1996:147) asserts that “death” is at work in this kind of thought: she claims that for one of the terms to acquire meaning, it must destroy the other. In binary thought, the “couple” cannot be left intact. The struggle for signifying supremacy is forever re-enacted. She adds that in the end, victory is equated with activity, and defeat with passivity, so that under patriarchy, the male is always the victor.

According to Spender (1981:1), the myth of male superiority is supported precisely because the male is always the victor in patriarchy. However, one must be careful not to confuse the notion of male “superiority” with that of male power. Male “superiority” is a myth that can be exposed and eradicated by knowledge and a change in consciousness. Although different, male “superiority” and male power are also inextricably linked, for male “superiority” has served as a justification for male power. Any exposure of the false nature of male “superiority”, though not a direct assault on male power, is an indirect attack that undermines it. Davies (1982:5) believes that positive images of strong and powerful women who demand their rights and affirm their diversity, are threatening to patriarchy. If and when sufficient members of society no longer give consensus to the myth of male superiority, if and when they no longer act in a manner which acquiesces with that “superiority” and permits it to go unchallenged, then, rather than being taken for granted, that power will have to be justified or transformed. It is because males have had power that they have been in a position to construct the myth of male superiority and to have it accepted; because of their power, they have been able to “arrange” the evidence so that it can be seen to substantiate the myth.

The “rule” that associates men with the positive side of the binary opposition, must be challenged if one is to construct views of the world in which both

sexes are accorded equal value (Spender, 1981:2). When one begins to select, pattern and interpret according to the rule that the sexes are equal, different views of reality are constructed. The claim for male "superiority" will no longer seem reasonable and male monopoly in power will become problematic. Each day the world is constructed according to arbitrary dualisms. One selects, patterns and interprets the flux of events in the attempt to make life meaningful and do not realise how deeply entrenched and arbitrary these rules are. The myth of male "superiority" is deeply embedded in virtually every aspect of human existence. It is a myth that may be attacked, but is still difficult to eradicate, for myths continue to exist after they have been intellectually repudiated. The myth of male superiority in particular is fundamental to our social order and therefore hard to dislodge. One of our most fundamental rules for making sense of our male-dominated world is based upon dualist thinking. One imposes these rules upon the world so that what one sees conforms to what one has learnt to see. One of the crucial factors in the construction of this reality is *language* (Spender, 1981:2).

2.1.2 Dualist language

Language is the means of ordering the world and constructing realities. Selden *et al.* (1997:69-70) suggest that language is a *system*, a pattern of paired binary oppositions. The notion of language as a system of paired binary oppositions underlies the Swiss Linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure's conception of the sign. *Course in General Linguistics* (1915), posthumously published, has had a major influence on contemporary literary theory. The underlying assumption of de Saussure's thought is that the sign is bipartite, and consists of the signifier and the signified. According to Saussure, there is a natural tendency for one signified to seek its own signifier, and to form with it a *positive unit*. Meaning is thus acquired through a system of relations: each signifier signifies not by asserting a positive univocal meaning but by marking a difference, a distinction within a system of opposites. Similarly, according to dualist thought, identity is constructed by constituting a difference within the system of (binary) oppositions (Selden *et al.*, 1997:68).

It is not surprising that since the system of language operates on binary principles, its “utterances” in real life also consist of binary oppositions, in which one term is privileged over the other.

Poststructuralist thought, however, insists on the essentially unstable nature of signification (Sarup, 1993:1-2). The sign is not so much a unit with two sides as a momentary “fix” between two moving layers. Identity can therefore never be fixed within static pairs of oppositions, because for every signified there are several signifieds, and each signified becomes yet another signifier with its own array of signifieds.

A poststructuralist view of the sign entails that sexual identity can also therefore not be restricted to a particular set of binary oppositions, in which the male is associated with the positive term and the female with the negative, inferior term. Rather, a critique is launched against such an empirical system, which sees the subject as the source of all knowledge, receiving impressions from without, which it organises into a knowledge of the world and expressing it in the apparently transparent medium of language. This of the rational subject notion depends upon dualist thought – the “subject” grasps the “object” and puts it into words. Traditionally, the male has been seen as the subject, grasping the “object”, the female, and putting it into words.

It is thus evident that the structure and use of language brings reality into being and if language is predisposed, reality will also be predisposed. If the rules, which underlie our language system, our symbolic order, are invalid, then one is daily deceived. One semantic “rule” which operates in language is that of the male-as-norm: the world is classified on the premise that the standard human being is a male, and when there is but one norm then those who do not comply with it are placed into a category of deviation. By arranging the objects and events of the world according to the “rules” of dualist thought, the rationale and the vindication for male supremacy is justified. It is therefore important to create alternative rules for classifying the world.

2.1.2.1 The semantic derogation of women

Spender (1980:14) is of the view that the notion of the male-as standard is thus reflected in language, and defines this notion of “androcentrism”: “English is biased in favour of the male in both syntax and semantics”. This view is in

accordance to that of Barthes who asserts that the sentence is hierarchical, since it implies subjections and subordinations (1975:50). There is thus a link between women's devaluation in language and their devaluation in society.

Muriel Schulz (1975:64-75) relates sexism in language to society and observes that it is not mere coincidence that there are more positive words in language for describing men. Nor is it an "accident" that there are so many negative words for females with no semantic equivalent for males. Words like "cow" and "bitch", for example, are being used in a negative manner for describing women, and sometimes, gay men, but there are no equivalent for men. The word "bull" does not have the same negative meaning as "cow" but instead, it is perceived as positive, denoting virility and proactiveness. Irrespective of origin or intent, words which are marked for women have often negative connotations.

In a patriarchal society, words become negative when they shift to the sphere of women. For instance, Miller and Swift (1976:6) observe that once a boy's name become popular as a girl's name it loses its appeal and usually ceases to be used for boys. Names like Shirley, Leslie, Beverly, Evelyn and Sydney all began as boys' names but when they became popular as girls' names, they acquired negative connotations and are now rarely used for boys. Miller and Swift argue that "once a name or a word becomes associated with women, it is rarely again considered suitable for males" (1976). They also observe that there is no reciprocity as the process does not operate in reverse. A word for women assumes negative connotations even when a positive equivalent exists for men. The words *spinster* and *bachelor*, for example, designate an unmarried adult, but the former is negative where the latter is not.

There are numerous examples of semantic derogation of women. Little stigma seems to have become attached to *courtier*, but although *courtesan* was once an equivalent term, it has acquired negative sexual connotations. *Sir* is still used as a title and as a form of respect – and, unlike *Madam*, does not refer to someone who keeps a brothel. Similarly, *Master* has lost little of its force, whereas *Mistress* has acquired almost exclusively sexual connotations and is no longer associated with the person who accepted responsibility and exercised control over the essential tasks of a household. Elizabeth II is no

less a “genuine” monarch than her father, but whereas *King* retains its positive meanings, *Queen* has also developed sexual connotations, especially to denote a homosexual man.

Muriel Schulz argues that *all* words that are associated with women acquire negative connotations because there is a fundamental semantic “rule” in society which constructs male supremacy: the “logic” lies not in the word, but in the sex. The way meaning is created in society depends upon dividing the world into binary oppositions in which the positive is assigned to the masculine and the negative to the feminine. Almost all animate nouns in English are masculine and this means that most of the semantic space is occupied by males. Masculinity is the unmarked form: the assumption is that the world is male until proven otherwise. Women are the marked form and are the proof of “otherwise”. It is not just that the vocabulary is divided into two unequal portions with fewer nouns referring to women, but this smaller number of words also encompasses that which is perceived of lesser value. Words that are marked for women refer to specifically women’s activities, which are evaluated from a male point of view and perceived as inferior.

Often, when women attempt to move outside the “lesser” spheres that have been allocated to them, they do not join the ranks of those who enjoy positive status, because they carry their femaleness, that is to say, their “minus-maleness”, with them. This is an example of what Stanley terms “negative semantic space for women” (1977:66). When a woman becomes a professional in one of the fields usually reserved for males, she does not move into the corresponding semantic space. Instead, she must signify that the norm, the positive, does not apply and so she becomes a female surgeon, a woman lawyer, or a woman writer. For a woman who does not wish to be compared to men there is “nowhere to go” in language, no matter what she does or what words she coins to describe her activities: she cannot step outside the negative sphere. Unless irony or insult is intended, it is usually a violation of the semantic rule to refer to males with terms that are marked for “minus-males”. It is all right for example to call a mixed sex group “guys”, but it is a mistake – and an insult – to refer to a group which contains even one male as “gals”. There is a loss of prestige when males are referred to in “female” terms.

The semantic derogation of women fulfils a dual function: it helps to construct women's "inferiority" and it also confirms it. This process is not a simple, linear one, but complex and dialectical. In a society where women are devalued, the words that refer to them also assume negative connotations.

2.1.2.2 The male lineage

The traditional male lineage perpetuates women's inferior status within patriarchal binary thought. Only men have "real" names, that is names that are permanent. The permanency of their names is one of the rights of being male. This has both practical and psychological ramifications for the construction of – and the maintenance of male supremacy which entails the invisibility of women. Fathers pass their names on to their sons and, in the absence of a male heir the family "dies out". A direct result of this practice can be found in the development of history as the story of the male line (Spender, 1981:24-26). This practice is visible in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which the names Offred, Ofglen, Ofwarren are transient and constructed around a male centre – Fred, Glen, Warren. These women are "off the centre", in other words, marginal. Their names change when they are assigned to another Commander. Only the names of the centre, the Commanders, are permanent. When women have no right to names in general, and family names in specific, the concept of women as property of men is reinforced. The male lineage constructs the representation of women as sex objects in that it signals when they are not available, but the property of other males.

It is often inevitable that those who perform the naming should do so from their own perspective, taking themselves as the centre, and naming the rest in relation to themselves. This is why it is vital for women to rename the world, also, in relation to themselves. It is because women were excluded from naming the world, from encoding their own experiences, that it is necessary to rename. The history of men and the naming by men are partial, but their meanings have been imposed as the whole. By taking themselves as the norm men have constructed a body of knowledge in which their own image is continually enhanced and strengthened.

It would not suffice to "eliminate" all sexist words in language; what is needed are more positive words for women. Strategies of elimination are short

sighted, for the problem lies not in words, but in the semantic “rule” that male is positive and “minus male” is negative. It is the semantic “rule”, operating on dualist thought, which needs to change, not the words themselves.

2.1.2.3 The value of women’s words.

Individuals tend to acquire and use words associated with their daily activities. In a society that practices a sexual division of labour, it is not surprising that women have a different vocabulary from men. Within patriarchal order, however, in which women are devalued, their language is devalued to such an extent that they are often silenced (Spender, 1981:54).

There is a historical aspect to the silence of women that casts some light on their present position. Historically, women have been excluded from the production of cultural forms and language. Both sexes have the capacity to generate meaning, but women have not been in the position to have their meanings taken up and incorporated in the society. Women writers of one generation have often been unknown to those of the next.

Since the “chain” is broken, each generation of women had to begin afresh to create its meanings, unaware of what had gone before. The entire history of women’s struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence repeatedly. Each work by a woman has been received as if it had emerged from nowhere: as if each woman had lived and worked without any historical past or contextual present. Women’s writings have been presented as sporadic, erratic, orphaned of any tradition of its own (Spender, 1981:52-54).

2.1.3 Stereotypes and reality

Spender (1981:90) points out that, historically, men have generated the reality that women are required to share. It is therefore not surprising that women characters are often stereotypes. Stereotypes for women are often based on the notion of “femininity”, and include the stereotype of the virgin, the wife and the mother. These stereotypes may constitute concepts which both sexes are familiar with, but it has often been generated by one sex (the male) and might include characteristics that do not correlate to an individual woman’s experience.

In a patriarchal culture, stereotypes, especially that of femininity are expressed, defined and perceived by most men as a *condition* of being female, while women see it as an *addition*, and a status to be achieved. Men are limited to their own definitions, while women, as the “other”, understand those definitions and what is beyond them. Some women constantly present themselves to men according to the idea of femininity and imitate a male constructed and non-existent ideal. One assumes that the ideal of femininity is natural and truthful, because no alternatives are presented. But women's “reality” is often multi-dimensional since they are aware of this ideal as a male projection, and although they know it is not accurate, nevertheless go to great lengths to preserve this illusion. Women then often experience a “gap” between their own experience and the ideal of femininity. Atwood's women and men characters are aware of the one-dimensional reality of such an ideal. However, many of them are locked inside this one-dimensional reality and are unaware of alternative possibilities.

In order to change one's reality and create alternative meanings, one first has to look at language. Poststructuralist feminist theory is based on the notion that it is only in language that social reality can have any meaning. Meaning is obtained through a range of discursive systems which support power structures. This means that alternative realities and experiences are at risk of not being articulated or legitimised just because they do not maintain the dominant order of social power. Stereotyped images are therefore sustained and reinforced. A repressed group has a great deal of difficulty in expressing itself because its ideas have to be delivered in the language of the dominant group.

Stereotypes are thus not innate or “pre-existent”, but rather, human agents divide the world into “meaningful” categories. The relationship between language and reality is important, because those who create language create reality.

Language is not neutral, a mere vehicle carrying thoughts: it actively constructs reality. Poststructuralist thought makes it clear that words and things or thoughts never become one. The sign is a structure of difference, since half of it is “not there” and the other half is “not that”. Since the signifier and signified are continually breaking apart and reattaching in new

combinations, there is no available area of certainty (Sarup, 1993:33). Derrida (1978:281) argues that the realm of an independent and final signified does not exist and that no particular signifier can be regarded as referring to any particular signified. Therefore, the system of signifiers cannot be escaped. According to Poststructuralist viewpoint, no set of “fixed” characteristics can thus be pinned onto women. It is therefore crucial to eradicate binary thinking in order to undermine patriarchal thought. The binary system creates a hierarchy in which terms associated with the “feminine” are seen as negative and even inferior, whereas terms associated with the “masculine” are seen as powerful and superior. The myth of male superiority is thus established, which justifies male power. This myth is constructed in language and a language that operates on binary principles will restrict gender identity to binary pairs. If, however, one challenges binary thinking, one can construct diverse *Weltanschauung*, and create spaces for the representation of identities beyond existing stereotypes. The next chapter will investigate the role of Poststructuralism as a means of going beyond binary thought. A new way of looking at language and reality is essential, because, as Benjamin Whorf (1976:256) states: there is “no act of unfettered imagination, ... but a strict use of already patterned materials. If asked to invent forms not already prefigured in the pattern of his (sic) language, the speaker is negative in the same manner as if asked to make fried eggs without eggs”. Sexist stereotypes cannot exist prior to sexist language not already in practice. Therefore, new representations, which cannot draw on past meanings, are meaningless.

Chapter 3

3. BEYOND DUALIST THOUGHT

The previous chapter investigates the role dualist thought plays in the creation of gender stereotypes. This section will investigate theories of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous in order to highlight the divided and fluid nature of identity, and by so doing, provides a means of going beyond binary oppositions, responsible for creating gender stereotypes. The understanding of Poststructuralist thought is vital in order to understand how Margaret Atwood opens up the “fixed” nature of gender stereotypes. French Feminist theoreticians, such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, in seeking to dissolve gender stereotypes, have focused on language as the domain in which such stereotypes are structured, but they are also influenced by Sigmund Freud’s Psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious.

3.1.1 Divided subjectivity: Sigmund Freud

According to Robbins (2000:107), Psychoanalysis has had a far-reaching influence on Poststructuralism. Some of the key ideas of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan will be investigated in order to highlight how Feminist theorists have built upon them.

The two most significant theories that Freud offers to contemporary Feminist thought are the notion of the unconscious as the prime motivator and his view that individuals achieve gendered adulthood through social processes rather than through innate biological ones. His theory of the Oedipus complex provides a psychological as well as social explanation for heterosexuality as an acquired, not an innate, sexual mode. Freud argues that a newborn child is bisexual and sees him or herself as the centre of his/her universe, with no sense of differentiation. At this stage, the child’s mother is not perceived as a separate being, but as part of the child. A child does not see the world and him/herself as separate, but as a continuous. However, when a desire is not immediately gratified, the child starts perceiving the world as separate from the self. Selfhood is therefore constructed on the grounds of a loss, and only then does the child recognise the mother as “other”, separate from the self.

Freud suggests that this sense of loss brings about desire ("I want" as a demand which has not been met) and that desire produces language ("I want" has to be formulated in language).

For both boys and girls, the first object of desire is the mother, the provider of their nourishment, care and physical needs. But in order to become separate selves, they must split away from their mothers, despite their desires to unite with her since she is the source of pleasure and comfort. Freud calls this process the Oedipus complex.

For the boy child, the Oedipus complex begins when he discovers that women have no penises. This realisation shocks him horribly, and he postulates that girls must have been mutilated by castration, which makes him afraid that he may be punished in a similar way for his desire for his mother, a desire that eventually becomes recognised as forbidden because it is incestuous. Since the father is the person who has the power to punish in the family; the boy child decides that discretion is the better part of valour. To protect his own sign of masculinity, his penis, he attempts to please the father by identifying with him and simultaneously repressing his desire for his mother. The reward for his act of repression is that the boy child will eventually come to share the power of the father as a reward for giving up the mother's body. Heterosexual orientation is thought to be established when the boy decides to be like his father, and when he directs his desires towards women.

It is evident that the girl child cannot have the same experience as the boy child and Freud's sees the female Oedipus complex as a far more tortured path that the girl child has to overcome to achieve a separate personality. Like the boy child, Freud maintains, the girl is also bisexual at birth, with endless desires and inability to differentiate between self and other. The process of differentiation begins when the girl discovers that she has no penis, and she is, as it were, already castrated. Freud sees this as a very traumatic experience for the girl who discovers her own 'lack' in comparison to the 'wholeness' of the male body¹.

The subject that emerges from the Oedipal process is split between the unconscious and conscious. The unconscious is indifferent to reality, and

manifests itself in dreams. Freud (1923) postulates his theory of the tripartite division of the mind into the ego, the superego and the id. Consciousness is but one property of mental life, which may co-exist along with the other properties or may be absent (Freud, 1923:9). It is thus no longer possible to regard an individual as a fully unified and rational being. According to Kristeva (1989:28), it is the Freudian revolution that achieves the displacement of the Western *épistémé* from its presumed centrality which entails that meaning is no longer the act of a transcendental ego, cut off from its body, its unconscious, and its history.

3.1.2 Jacques Lacan

According to Robbins (2000:113), Feminist theory often draws on the writings of Jacques Lacan, who reinterprets Freud's theories in terms of Poststructuralist principles. A Poststructuralist position to gender stereotypes would be valuable, since it seeks to undermine "fixed" categories.

In *Ecrits: A Selection* (1977), Lacan revises Freud's fundamental concepts through the prism of language studies and asserts that "the unconscious is structured like language" (1977). Lacan opposes Saussure's view that a linguistic sign is a union of signifier and signified, and believes that signifiers have no intrinsic relationship to signifieds. The relationship between a word and image is arbitrary and maintained by conventional agreement. Meaning is subsequently contingent rather than absolute. It follows that, if the unconscious is structured like language, it is structured in such a way that its structures are recoverable and describable, and that meanings are multiple, contingent, and unstable.

According to Lacan (1977), language and identity resist stability. He draws on the Freudian model of the Oedipus complex, but insists on its basis in language. Lacan's infant, similar to Freud's, has undifferentiated desires and sees the world and himself as continuous. Lacan calls this pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal phase the "imaginary realm". With time, children pass through the "mirror stage" when they see themselves in a mirror and identify with the reflected image.

¹ Freud's theory has been discussed and rejected by Feminist scholars and Kate Millet

Lacan views this identification as “misrecognition” (*sic*) because the image is only a substitute for the self, a signifier of the self and not the “real” self. This misrecognition makes identity a necessary fiction. But this “misrecognition” is necessary because without representation there is only infantile passivity, powerlessness and anxiety. Being able to form a single coherent image of oneself, even if the image is based on falsehood, is a necessary stage in the formation of subjectivity². Nonetheless, based on this misrecognition, children begin to see themselves as separate individuals differentiating themselves from the rest of the world. At this stage, they also begin to speak and, according to Lacan, the development of language is triggered by a lack: a need that is not met requires language to formulate the need as a demand (“I want”). The realisation of the separation of the self and world is what produces language. This development is also based on Saussurean linguistics, since words are not the things they represent, but merely substitutes for them.

among them in *The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her fictions* (1982).

² In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1983), Marlow also realises the power of an image and the possible collapse of civilisation if representations are shattered. Marlow attempts to protect women from this realisation: “It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over” (Conrad, 1983:39). Marlow also asserts that, “They – the women I mean – are out of it – should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own lest ours gets worse” (HD, 1983:84). Marlow realises that women must retain their position within the dualism of masculinity/femininity, in order to constitute male identity. The narrative of Marlow's meeting with the Intended shows the extent to which the ideal is “rotten to the core”. In attempting to protect women, Marlow subscribes to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity – of speaking the truth, of being chivalrous. He believes in “truth” as a positive moral value, and speaks of his disgust at lies: “You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies ... It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do” (HD, 1983:57). Yet, he lies to the Intended, rewriting Kurtz's last words as her name and not “the horror, the horror”. He cannot tell what Kurtz had really said, for fear that it would destroy civilisation. Marlow's lie is thus born of chivalry although it demonstrates the contradictions in his version of proper masculinity: lies are bad, but are necessary to protect enfeebled femininity. According to Pollock (1996:222), the disruption of the binary opposition rebounds on men as well as on women. If femininity is not what it is supposed to be, then masculinity is troubled as well.

The entry into language is an entry into a realm with pre-existing rules, such as grammar, socialisation and acceptable behaviour and prevent the individual from behaving in a socially unacceptable manner. Traditionally, in most societies, prohibitions are associated with the father, the traditional locus of power and restraint within the family. The authority of the father is extended to society, representing the institutions of socialisation – the church, the law etc. The process of acculturation then, depends on identification with the laws of the father, what Lacan calls the “nom du père”, which in French means both the “No of the Father” and the “Name of the Father”. The realm that children enter through their acquisition of language is called the “symbolic realm”.

Lacan thus views the Symbolic order as the mode of language that appeals to reason: it is within the Symbolic order that the discourses of power, science, philosophy, authoritative and literature of realism take place³. Breeches in Symbolic discourses of authority; the relationship between the Symbolic and the Imaginary (Nietzsche’s notion of the marriage between the Dionysian and the Apollonian), how one term deconstructs the other, are possible tools in disrupting the “stability” of binary oppositions. Meaning will become unstable, and the hierarchy contingent. Identity is also unstable since the unconscious (rather than the conscious) constitutes the prime motivation. The unconscious belongs to the Dionysian realm, since it is unpredictable, irrational and unknowable, and as such resists permanency.

According to Lacan, subjectivity is formed in language. If words are mere substitutes for something that is missing, one’s selfhood is as unfixed and contingent as the language in which it is expressed. The Symbolic and Imaginary realms coexist in the single self and, therefore, identity is always multiple.

The multiple nature of the “self” is reflected in the word “I” which is always multiple, since it refers to me, the speaker in the first person, but it also refers to you when you are the speaker. The marker of one’s unique identity – the “I” is thus always plural rather than single, a signifier that appeals to oneness, but which has infinite numbers of signifieds.

³ Thus, according to Lacan, the entry into language is also the entry into the realm of reason, order, laws and rules. This realm, ruled by reason, is what Nietzsche called “the Apollonian”

Lacan's combination of structuralist linguistics with psychoanalysis entails that just as words do not form a natural units, "woman" is not part of a binary opposition with a final signified. Instead, "woman" is also a signifier, which is temporary connected to other signifieds. Lacan's view of identity as constituted by language is liberating: if characters, authors, and readers are effects of language, then one can see the world and society in various ways: the three categories are texts, existing on the same fictive plane, none of them being "superior" to the other.

3.1.3 Julia Kristeva

Kristeva has been influenced by Lacan's theories of language, especially his view of the arbitrariness of sexual difference. Kristeva is critical of structuralist linguistics and its assumption that the system of language (called *langue* by Saussure) operates as a fixed structure that can be defined and analysed. She views language as a process of making meaning, dependent for its force on extra-linguistic features such as context and tone. As such, language is never a closed system, but rather a series of gestures towards meaning directed at the reader or the listener in writing or speech. Language thus becomes the site of contradictions and struggle. Writers or speakers always communicate in a contingent way – meaning is never fixed or final, since their audiences are always heterogeneous and they therefore read and listen in terms of their differences. These ideas are important in that they open up the fissures in the apparently closed systems by which patriarchal thought confines subjectivity to a fixed entity. Kristeva criticises the foundations of patriarchy, but also liberal Feminist agendas, which also rely on oppositions and dualist thought in their attempt to give privilege to women's writings.

Kristeva's work undermines the very concepts that underpin activist political movements. She refuses the binary oppositions that make feminism as activist politics possible - culture/nature; male/female - arguing that one term is always, to some extent, present within the other.

Kristeva (1987:37) introduces the concept of "intertextuality", a concept that depends on discourses competing with and modifying each other within a

(Danto, 1965:35). The Apollonian is in contrast to the imaginary realm of the unconscious with

single text. The concept of intertextuality has been influenced by Mikhail Bahktin. Kristeva explains:

Bahktin situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them. The diachronic is transformed into synchrony, and in light of this transformation, linear history appears as an abstraction. The only way a writer can participate in history is by transgressing this abstraction through a process of reading-writing; that is, through the practice of a signifying structure in relation or opposition to another structure. ... The poetic word, polyvalent and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognised culture. Bahktin was the first to study this logic, and he looked for its roots in carnival. Carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of language censored by grammar and semantics, and, at the same time, is a social and political protest. There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law (Kristeva, 1987:36).

Kristeva views the subject as formed in language and politics, but who also experiences him/herself as transgressing the boundaries between these discourses. Individuality is the "excess" that cannot be contained within a single system and the speaking subject is a kind of text, although the meaning of a subject as the meaning of any text, is not fixed. Because people are born into cultural and historical contexts, they have both a collective and individual experience: they are texts overwritten with traces of other texts or contexts.

Subjectivity bears marks of these traces, and its meaning lies at the intersection of different texts⁴. It is for this reason that Kristeva rejects the notion of "feminine language" and argues that since women are texts, they are overwritten by the traces of a dominant male culture. She criticises Feminists who insist on the adoption of a separate language for women, on cutting all ties with the language of the so-called "phallic communication" and who attack logic and the sign on the basis that women function as objects in patriarchal society. Kristeva thus believes that there is no neutral position outside language. She cannot conceive of a "feminine language" an *écriture féminine*,

its anarchic, uncontrolled desires, which Nietzsche called the Dionysian.

⁴ According to Pollock (1996) individuals could be seen as knots; things go through one, genetic codes, histories of nations, languages one speaks. And if one is an individual, it is because these threads are knotted together in a particular time and place, and they hold. There is thus no metaphysical sense of the self, since the knot is vulnerable and "re-knottable".

or *parler-feminine*, nor does she believe that such a language, were it possible, would dissolve the sexed inequalities of human existence. She believes, instead, that it would only privilege the previously “inferior” term within the binary opposition.

Kristeva does not believe in “Woman” as a totalising category, but in a real woman who has relationships with men, with other women and with children. These relationships are not the identical, although they may have overlapping concerns. By rejecting homogenous categories, she removes the site of generalisations upon which stereotypes depend. She views the subject as not only split or fragmented, but also “in process” (*en procès*). The subject is not fixed, but always in process, developing (Kristeva, 1986:19).

She extends her notion of a fluid subject to texts and views them as polyvalent, plural and unfixed.

The idea of “processive” subjectivity resists the rigidity of sexual or gendered identity that can trap women in the so-called feminine roles⁵.

Kristeva develops Lacan’s theory of the Symbolic and the Semiotic⁶ and suggests that these two categories are inseparable in creating meaning. Although semiotics is the “science of signs”, it is connected to the Symbolic because it seeks to analyse meaning functions into a totalised system. Pre-linguistic language, which will eventually become repressed by Symbolic functions, is what she calls the Semiotic. Semiotic writing takes place where the relationships between words and concepts, privileged by the Symbolic, are significantly disrupted. The two cannot be separated in creating meaning:

These two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; in other words, so-called “natural” language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic. On the other hand, there are nonverbal signifying systems that are constructed

⁵ The importance of the notion fluid identities is illustrated in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). When Gwendolyn Fairfax is told by Jack Worthing that she is perfect, she exclaims: “Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions” (Wilde 1994:364).

⁶ The concepts of the Symbolic and the Semiotic are not to be simply understood as masculine and feminine relations with language and culture. The Symbolic may indeed be a function of patriarchy, but most women successfully internalise its rules and learn to speak and function within its structures. Men can also use semiotic pulsations against the rules of the Symbolic. The realms of the Symbolic and the Semiotic, within the signifying process define potentially shifting relations to culture, not biological positions that cannot be altered.

exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music, for example). But ... this exclusivity is relative, precisely because of the necessary dialectic between the two modalities of the signifying process, which is constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always both symbolic and semiotic, no signifying system he produces can be “exclusively” semiotic or “exclusively” symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by and indebtedness to both (Kristeva, 1984:24).

The language the subject speaks is not fixed, and since language constitutes the subject, the subject is not fixed either. The subject is thus not the source of meaning, but becomes the site of meaning, and therefore, undergoes a “dispersal” of identity and a loss of coherence. The Symbolic and the Semiotic then, are not binary oppositions at different ends of a rigid scale. They are part of a continuum in the process of making meaning.

3.1.4 Luce Irigaray

Luce Irigaray (1974) agrees with Kristeva that there is no “neutral” position outside language, and that even “Feminist” positions are the product of hegemonic patriarchal thought. The only way to create meaning, according to Irigaray, is to exercise power and simultaneously criticise it in an attempt to avoid the crystallisation of rigid representations.

She considers the mirror as a common metaphor for realism – the conventions of representation that are supposed to reproduce the world as it “really” is. She believes that Western culture privileges the act of seeing because what cannot be seen cannot be there. She modifies Lacan’s theory of the mirror phase, in which the child sees himself or herself in a mirror, but highlights the notion that the mirror is a signifier, and is therefore part of a system of representation as opposed to an unmediated reality.

Irigaray argues that all the major representations of Western thought are based on the seeing male I/eye (scophophilia). The identification of image with self must be broken up and so must the “seeing-believing” model in order to find new languages in which women can represent themselves and, in which women’s subjectivity can be understood as “many” as in opposition to one, the lacking “Other” of male sexuality. For this reason, Atwood’s deconstruction of gender stereotypes is crucial. She shows that the image

and the self, signifier and signified, are not the same and they do not form a stable unit.

3.1.5 Hélène Cixous

Unlike Kristeva, Hélène Cixous (1976) seeks an *écriture féminine*, a writing that can adequately represent women's experiences. As a consequence, her work has been criticised for a dangerously essentialist nature, because "her concern for free play rejects biologism, but her privileging of the female body seems to embrace it" (Selden *et al.*, 1997:145). Like Irigaray, Cixous believes that a revolution in language is the first step towards a revolution in subjectivity.

Her fundamental arguments are based on the premise that the Enlightenment tradition of Western philosophy, with its emphasis on gendered binary oppositions, has profoundly influenced the ways in which knowledge circulates. Similarly, it has limited the possible meanings of woman because women are negatively affected by the closed system of binary logic. Any system of binary thought is always a hierarchical opposition – one term is more privileged, accorded more power than the other, and also defined at the expense of the other.

In patriarchy, the "inferior", negative proposition is always the feminine. In fact, patriarchy maintains its power by developing a series of characteristics which label the "feminine" and stresses that if one is born in a woman's body, one will necessarily and naturally exhibit these (negative) characteristics. A woman, who does not embody them and does not conform to the feminine stereotype, is in danger of being considered monstrous, unnatural, anti-social and deviant (Cixous *In* Eagleton, M. 1996:147).

Cixous does not propose a reversal of the site of privilege within binary logic, on the basis that since these oppositions take place in language, the hierarchy in binary thought is inescapable. Women are being defined by passivity and therefore they are annihilated as subjects because the subject (in grammar as in life) is active and traditionally equated with men.

Instead of promoting mere equality between the oppositions, she embraces Derrida's principle of *différance* (Robbins, 2000:177).

According to Derrida (1982:16) the principle of *différance* means both “difference” and “deferral”. Meaning takes place within the realm of *différance* in so much as the meaning of words depends on their differences to other words, rather than on having fixed meanings of their own. Meaning is thus always deferred and can never be present. If one views identity according to the concept of *différance* it becomes evident that identity cannot be a fixed since it is constituted by its difference from other identities.

It is thus evident that the combination of Feminist and Poststructuralist thought provides a means for challenging binary oppositions. Derrida (1982) regards the signifier and the signified as having no fixed relationship and asserts that identity resists stability in the same manner. Subjectivity is formed in language, and if words are mere substitutes for something that is missing, then one’s identity is also unstable. Kristeva (1987:111) concurs that language is not a closed system, but is “intertextual”. Intertextuality is in opposition to binary oppositions, since it denotes the transposition of several sign-systems into another. Similarly, Cixous draws upon Derrida’s theory of *différance*, which opposes the permanent pairings of binary thought.

Feminist and Poststructuralist thought could provide a means of going beyond binary oppositions, and resisting gender stereotypes. Chapter 4 will investigate some of the traditional stereotypes for women, and show how the identities of the protagonists are fluid. The next chapter will focus on *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* in order to show how Margaret Atwood deconstructs the “fixed” nature of gender stereotypes.

Chapter 4

4. ATWOOD'S DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER STEREOTYPES

Poststructuralist principles provide a means for deconstructing binary oppositions that promotes gender stereotypes. Dualist thought insists upon the stable, and therefore, natural relationship between signifier and signified. The "stable" relationship between the signifier and the signified corresponds to opposition man/woman, and this hierarchical opposition gives the first term priority over the second. The unity of the sign is regarded as natural and gender stereotypes are consequently regarded as innate. This section will provide an overview of gender stereotypes of the wife and the mother and the virgin, which Atwood deconstructs in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*, by showing that these stereotypes are not natural properties of women. It is however, important to note that the stereotypes of the virgin, the wife and the mother are not the only literary stereotypes for women. The stereotypes of the wife, for instance, include that of the wicked stepmother, the old maiden or oppressive aunts such as Mrs. Reed in *Jane Eyre*. Another stereotype is the wicked woman, such as Lady Macbeth, and often include the stereotype of the seductress (Delilah), and the adulteress (Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*). The stereotype of the virgin sometimes includes that of the damsel in distress, such as Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. These stereotypes often flow into another and can easily flow into its binary opposition for example, Tess of the D'Urbervilles is regarded as a pious virgin, but becomes a fallen woman once she has been raped.

4.1 The stereotype of the feminine: the wife, the mother and the virgin

The stereotype of the feminine includes the stereotype of the virgin, the wife and the mother. Virginia Woolf (1985) suggests that femininity is a male construct and a myth serving to enhance masculine identity. According to Woolf (1985:35), "women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size". According to Spacks (1975:13), since Classical times, in satire and in moral commentary, the looking glass has been associated with women, and used by male writers as an emblem of women's narcissism.

Contemporary women critics not only associate the mirror with male rather than female narcissism, but they point out the degree to which men convert women into instruments of masculine self-love.

Historically, “women” have existed as men’s “Other”, and as such, they have been the site of various stereotypes, created by male writers and artists. However, according to Simone de Beauvoir (1972:594) “women”, as “men” is not a homogenous category and “it is absurd then, to speak of “woman” in general as of men”. There is no mysterious feminine essence, only a feminine situation, which in many respects has remained constant through the centuries and which largely determines the characters of its victims (de Beauvoir, 1972:671). The notion of “femininity” is a fiction created by men, assented to by women untrained in the rigours of logical thought or conscious of the advantages to be gained by compliance with masculine fantasies¹. Their assent traps them in the prison of “repetition and immanence” which limits their possibilities. Man reserves for himself the terrors and triumphs of transcendence and offers woman safety, the temptations of passivity and acceptance. He tells her that passivity and acceptance are part of her nature (Spacks 1975:15-16).

De Beauvoir also compares the mirror with water and states that “woman has often been compared to water because, among other things, she is the mirror in which the male, Narcissus-like, contemplates himself: he bends over her in good or bad faith. But in any case what he really asks of her is to be, outside of him, all that which he cannot grasp inside himself, because the inwardness of the existent is only nothingness and because he must project himself in order to reach himself” (1972). The “Self” is constituted by the “Other”, which is the repository site of negative aspects of the “Self”. De Beauvoir explains in her book *Second Sex* that to regard somebody as Other is to see him/her as an object rather than a subject driven by psychological needs and desires similar to those of the viewer (1972:16). This is the foundation of prejudice and it can be seen as a psychic defence against accepting people different from oneself.

¹ Derrida (1978:49) agrees by stating that the category “women” is a fiction, which must be dismantled. Also, “women” is not a determinable entity, but a “non-identity” or a simulacrum.

Atwood criticises the way a woman's identity is constructed as "feminine" and "Other" in order to satisfy and reassure male identity. In such a construction, a woman is often reduced to a pure reflective surface, a "pool", a "mirror" or a "map". In "The Circle Game" she writes:

So how you trace me
Like a country's boundary ...
And I am fixed, stuck
Down on the map
this room, of your mind's continent
(CG, 49).

The notion of "women" as the "Other" entails that the woman has to impose a restriction upon her own identity. Her identity can only emerge on a different stage, alien to codified representations (such as femininity).

Atwood's prose poem, "Iconography" in *Murder in the Dark* comments on how a woman's identity becomes a man's projection and appropriation as she moulds herself into the object of male desire. This "arrangement" is evident in most of Western literature and visual arts:

He wants her arranged just so. He wants her, arranged.
He arranges to want her.
This is the arrangement they have made.
He is making her. Over from nothing, new. From scratch, the way he wants
(MD, 52).

The only alternative left to a woman, other than silence, is mimicry. A man's power is:
to make her do something she didn't like and then make her like it,
that was great power. The greatest power of all is when she doesn't
really like it but she's supposed to like it, so she has to pretend
(MD, 52).

Atwood exposes the notion that women characters are often cast in the role of the flat image in the mirror, devoid of depth. The reflection trapped in the looking glass does not allow for interpretation, because it is a signifier in the binary opposition with the signified, and therefore existing as an absence.

Femininity is thus a false representation achieved by imitation. Any alternative identities are silenced. Deprived of her subjectivity, she appears as the "simulacrum of a woman, the original nowhere" (Surfacing, 194). The notion of

femininity as imitation of a male ideal is described in *The Edible Woman* as “a bad imitation of whoever (sic) it happens to be a bad imitation of” (EW, 190)². Ferguson (1986:3-5) states that the rigidity of “fixed” images is reflected in the word used to describe them, *stereotypes*, a term taken by sociologists from printing, and originally referring to metal plates used to make exact duplicates. This is why the notion of imitation is so pertinent when stereotypes are involved. Stereotypes of people differ in one major way from metal ones: they need not duplicate the pattern exactly. As long as some aspects of the stereotype are present, the observer supplies the others from previous experience. Such patterns are called prejudices since they provoke judgement before more knowledge could be achieved. For instance, to the pattern “beautiful and blonde” the observer adds “dumb”, whether it applies to the specific person or not.

Ferguson (1986:11) explains that traditional images of women are usually associated with their biological roles, as virgins, wives, mothers and as sex objects. Margaret Atwood’s characters – both men and women – recognise the restriction of gender stereotypes but their departure from socially approved stereotypes often causes guilt, alienation and the sense of the divided self is aggravated (Ferguson, 1986:3-4).

It is not only women who are victims of gender stereotypes. Men too have been trapped in their biological roles, but they are not limited by them. Men have mostly been defined by their relationship to the external world – to nature, to society, and indeed, to God – whereas women have been defined in their relationship to men. Prehistoric cave drawings show men actively casting spears whereas women are portrayed as passive and pregnant, with their sexual characteristics grossly exaggerated³.

² In *Cat’s Eye* Elaine comments: “She’s mimicking something, something in her head, some role or image that only she can see” (CE, 244). And so in *Bodily Harm*, with Jake, Rennie feels like “a blank sheet of paper” for him “to doodle on” (BH, 105) a *Tabula Rasa* upon which man inscribes his self, reaffirming his own subjectivity. Similarly, in *The Blind Assassin*, Iris sees the bruises - first purple, then blue and then yellow - on her body made by Richard as a kind of code: and she was “sand and snow – written on, rewritten, smoothed over” (BA, 455).

³ An early example of exaggerated sexual characteristics is the Venus of Willendorf (c. 28,000 – 25,000 BC.). This statuette probably served as a fertility fetish. Typical of stereotypical representations, individual aspects are omitted in order to show the “general” idea of female fecundity: round big breasts, a large belly with no facial features.

Robbins (2000:1) believes that definitions are exclusive and therefore limiting. They operate as much by what they leave out as by what they include. The word “define” derives from the Latin verb *definire*, with its roots in the noun *finis*, meaning “to settle” or “to fix”, and a definition is something that fixes and limits meaning. Ideally, it does so with the intention of producing clarity and to provide “outlines” in order to make concepts more accessible. But it is important to understand that definitions always involves power relations in so much as those who define have generally more power than those who are being defined⁴.

In literary criticism the word “stereotype” usually carries a negative connotation because some critics feel that only fully developed, “round” characters are aesthetically valid. Yet, there are legitimate uses of stereotypes in literature because a flat character may serve as a contrast to a more rounded one⁵. The problem with images of women in literature is that they are largely constructed through the centre of consciousness of men characters, and are therefore often rendered as flat characters. Atwood states that if a book is written from the view of a central character, one gets a view of what is going on in the mind of that character, and the other characters will often remain flat (Struthers, 1990:64). According to Tillie Olsen (1978), an insubstantial amount of women writers are included into literary canons, and it is therefore not surprising, then, that women characters are often stereotypes, serving simply as foils, motivators, barriers or comforters to men characters who actively pursue adventure and the development of their own identities.

4.2 The stereotype of the wife

According to Spacks (1978:78), the notion of selflessness often accompanies stereotypes of the mother and the wife. Taking care of a child or a husband is alternately or simultaneously present in both stereotypes. These stereotypes entail the subordination of the woman who sacrifices herself to the needs and desires of others.

⁴ An early example of the act of naming is found in the Bible, in Genesis 2:20: Adam names each living creature, including woman (Bible, 1982). Naming is an act of discerning something about a creature, as well as an act of leadership and authority over that which is named (Bible, 1982). It is thus easy to see how the act of naming is political.

The original meaning of the word *wife* was “woman”, but with time, the word came to mean primarily a woman in relation to her husband. A woman who happily submits to her husband is the ideal but the one who does not, is abhorred. Most writers have focussed on one of these two poles to portray their women characters⁵.

Robbins (2000:78) points out that wife and mother figures are “finger posts” in that they point out the way for others. They live through others in contrast to the woman who lives for herself. In this context, wifehood is a limitation on a woman's independent character – it appears to be a private contract between two people, but its “hidden” duties (playing hostess, taking care of children, guests and husbands) are socially orientated, leaving very little space for the individual woman. In Atwood's novels, the man is mostly perceived as solid, linear and stable. They are a still point and a calculable presence. The women choose to identify with this traditional Western subject – the “he” who is coherent and stable (Deery, 1997:4). In contrast, the women often experience uncertainty, and see themselves as fragmented. They therefore fear self-integration, they fear being stretched and losing shape altogether. In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood has made it clear that this tendency to diffuse is not an advantage, but indicates a lack of power (Deery, 1997:4).

4.2.1 The wife in *The Edible Woman*

Wifehood is a central theme in *The Edible Woman* as some characters are married, some reject marriage, only to marry later (Ainsley), and some are engaged to be married, only to reject marriage later (Marian). Clara is married

⁵ E.M. Forster points out the above in his discussion of round and flat characters in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927:103-4).

⁶ As early as the fourteenth century, Chaucer embodied the ideal wife, who submits first to her father, then to her husband whose name she must take, in Griselde in *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1390). The daughter of a serf, Griselde is honoured when chosen by a nobleman as his bride, endures without complaint his depriving her of her children and replacing her with a new wife, and continues to be kind and loving to all regardless of her personal status. Although even the pilgrims who hears this tale know it is only an ideal, this image has persisted in literature and in life because it is an easy solution to the problem of dominance in a hierarchically organised society. According to Robbins (2000:52) the apotheosis of femininity, the female wife-figure from Coventry Patmore's poem “The Angel in the House” reflects on the impossibility of expressing woman's true perfection in words. Woolf (1972:285) agrees that “the Angel in the House” is intensely sympathetic and immensely charming. She is utterly unselfish. She excels in the difficult arts of family life and sacrifices herself daily. “... she is so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but prefers to sympathise always with the minds and wishes of others ...”.

to Joe and her “core” or identity has been taken away by the gender stereotypes of wife and mother. Ainsley, who at first glance seems an unconventional character, nevertheless desires to conform to the stereotype of “femininity” and wants to become a wife and mother. Marian, the protagonist, is engaged to Peter but after facing eating problems, rejects the traditional role of the wife, as exemplified by the characters of Clara and Ainsley. In *The Edible Woman*, Marian’s identity is torn between society’s expectations, which demand adherence to the traditional feminine role, and the need for self-realization

4.2.1.1 Clara

Marian learns that marriage can deeply affect, if not destroy one’s subjectivity. Her friend, Clara is married to Joe Bates, an Instructor in Philosophy. She marries at the end of her second year at university without completing her degree. As a wife and mother, Clara is restricted to the domestic sphere and loses contact with the outside world to the point where she hardly leaves the house. Clara and Joe move to an area in the opposite direction of the university in order to have a bigger house for the children. This move in space is symbolic of her move away from her former “self”, as well as from the possibilities of alternatives to the role of the wife and mother.

Clara is seven months pregnant with her third child and to Marian, she seems exhausted although she has always been “tall and fragile”. At high school, she has been exempted from Physical Education and always sat at the sidelines, watching the other girls. She has been the ideal of “translucent perfume-advertisement femininity” (EW, 36), while the other girls were “oily-potato-chip-fattened adolescents” (EW, 36). Marian considers Clara’s attitude towards Joe as sentimental, like the love stories in women’s magazines (EW, 131).

However, Clara’s femininity has a negative effect on her that is destroying her. Joe (her husband) realises that “femininity” is not an inherent quality of a woman and that Clara’s “feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her ... so she allows her core to get taken over by the husband ... she’s hollow, she doesn’t know who she is any more; her core has been destroyed” (EW, 235-6). He also suggests that her role as mother has made her forget who she was before she had children. Joe

encourages her to have an identity besides that of a wife and mother, he wants her to take an evening course at a university, but she refuses (EW, 236).

A soluble self-other boundary reflects women's position in mother-child relationships: Marian views Clara as being trapped in a parasitic relationship with her unborn child. Marian forgets that Clara has a mind at all or any perceptive faculties "above the merely sentient and sponge-like, since she had spent most of her time being absorbed in, or absorbed by, her tuberous abdomen" (EW, 130). Clara seems too trapped in the role of the wife and the mother to consider alternative identities, but at the same time, she makes bitter remarks about being "just a housewife" (EW, 38).

Clara is not the only one restricted by gender stereotypes – Ainsley points out that Joe is suffering too. She thinks that Clara is too passive, leaving all the work for Joe to do and she adds that he has aged a lot since she first met him. According to Ainsley, the gender roles of husband and father are wearing Joe out and Clara drains all his energy. It is thus clear that any rigid gender role, whether that of the wife or the husband, is restrictive and limiting.

4.2.1.2 Marian

Marian McAlpin is a conventional woman, who has good friends, and a stable job working for a market research company. She has an outgoing, ambitious and attractive man in her life. However, her life changes when Peter Wollander asks her to become his wife. Peter likes Marian's independence and the fact that "she is not the kind of girl who will try to take over his life" (EW, 61). However, after a while, it seems that Peter is the one who attempts to take over Marian's life.

Peter tells Marian about his best friend, Trigger, who became married. Marian realises that Peter views marriage as a trap, and he makes Trigger sound like "the last of the Mohicans, noble and free, the last of the dinosaurs, destroyed by fate ... and the last of the dodos, too dumb to get away" (EW, 64). He also criticises the bride for "sucking poor Trigger into the domestic void" (EW, 64). Marian immediately pictures the bride as a vacuum cleaner, sucking Trigger into the domestic sphere. Peter also makes predictions of his own solitary future (without friends) after marriage. It is obvious to Marian that Peter views

marriage as a hierarchy in which the subjectivity of one party will be assimilated by the other.

Marian invites Peter to dinner with her friend Len Slank, who has just returned from a journey overseas. At dinner, Peter is grumpy and detached, but his mood suddenly lifts when Len relates how women chase after him, and how he had to get away before it is too late. Peter starts to brighten up, immediately recognising Len as a friend, sharing his concerns about marriage. Peter starts to talk about his hunting expeditions, how he shoots rabbits “Wham”, through the heart. How he slits them down the belly and shakes them to get the guts to fall out. The hunting details upset Marian, also because Peter becomes more aggressive and sadistic.

In addition to hunting, Peter also discusses ways of photographing portraits, and Marian realises that he is “treating (her) like a stage-prop; silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline” (EW, 71). He sees himself as the “main character”, active and important, while she is supposed to be the passive supporting prop; silent and two-dimensional. Marian realises that her passivity will also be expected in marriage.

This realisation compels her to act in a way she has never done before: on their way from the restaurant to Len’s apartment, she starts to run. Peter and Len chase after her, after which they proceeded to Len’s apartment. Once in Len’s flat, Ainsley keeps her “little-girls-should-be-seen-and-not-heard” act up and sits still in the chair, holding her coca cola glass in her lap and contemplating her own reflection inside it. Peter expects Marian to behave “properly”, as Ainsley does. According to him, Marian is not behaving “properly” because she rejects her femininity. When she opposes him by saying that “femininity” has nothing to do with the fact that she is upset, his eyes narrows as though he is taking aim, he grits his teeth together and steps murderously hard on the accelerator (EW, 81).

Driving back from Len’s apartment, Peter and Marian attempt to forget their disagreement earlier in the evening. He lovingly untangles a piece of dust that has been caught in her hair and she feels limp as “a damp Kleenex” (EW, 82). A damp Kleenex is insubstantial – just like Marian in relation to Peter. It is then that Peter asks her to marry him.

The moment Peter proposes to Marian, she can see herself, small and oval, mirrored in his eyes (EW, 83). According to Hermansson, "small and oval" means egg-like and edible (the analogy between an egg and being in a relationship is also exemplified in Ainsley, who wants to go out with Len and who sits in a round wicker basket-chair with a quilted egg-yolk yellow corduroy cushion). Hermansson argues that once Marian becomes engaged, she symbolically becomes like an egg inside her shell and she gives up her position as free and independent individual.

Marian rejects marriage albeit at an unconscious level. Food and objects become metaphors for her subjectivity as a future wife⁷.

According to Carroll (1994:190), the metaphor exists when discrete elements co-exist in the same "space" or when various elements are integral features of a single bounded entity. The metaphor consists of two categories: a target domain and a source domain (Carroll, 1994:196). The source domain is mapped onto the target domain in order to form a metaphor. Food and objects are the source domains and Marian is the target domain. Marian draws the analogy between herself and meat, partly because Peter reacts in the same way when speaking about hunting and marriage. She extrapolates that she will be hunted down and devoured in the same manner that he hunts down and devours his food.

The metaphor of Marian as a two-dimensional outline recurs at the party that Peter holds in his apartment. Before the guests arrive, he wants to take a photograph of Marian, and significantly, he arranges the composition so that she is positioned in front of his guns. When focussing the lenses of the camera, her body starts to stiffen, because she recollects images of the animals hunted by Peter. Peter does not manage to take her picture, because they are interrupted by guests who start to arrive. Later the evening, he makes another attempt in taking Marian's picture. He raises the camera and aims

⁷ Robbins (2000:181) points out that Margaret Atwood uses a Cixousian model derived from Blake's poem "The Tyger", with its gendered oppositions of tiger and lamb: A certain amount of "tigerishness" is necessary if women are to achieve an independent as opposed to a dependent existence; if they are to avoid – at the extreme end of passivity – becoming meat. ... although society may slant things so that women appear to be better candidates for meathood than men and men better candidates for meat-eating. The nature of men is not fixed as inevitably predatory with females as their "natural" prey. Lambhood and tigerishness

while his “mouth opens in a snarl of teeth” (EW, 244). There is a blinding flash of light and Marian assumes that her picture has been taken and she immediately becomes flat – a two-dimensional representation: “She sensed her face as vastly spreading and papery and slightly dilapidated: a huge billboard smile, peeling away in flaps and patches, the metal surface beneath showing through” (EW, 244). According to Marian, “once he pulled the trigger, she would be fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change” (EW, 245). This image is a metaphor for Marian’s disappearing (or assimilated) identity in becoming Peter’s future wife. Her objectification is highlighted by the comparison between the camera and the gun: with Peter as the hunter and Marian as the hunted⁸. Peter even keeps his firearms in the same cupboard as his camera equipment. If Peter manages to take her picture, she will become “flat” (restricted to supporting roles). She will also become a surface to be decorated, according to his ideas of femininity. She will become as passive and faceless as a billboard, always pointing to something else and never to herself. It is significant that Peter does not manage to take Marian’s photograph. She avoids being trapped and fixed by the camera lens and his gaze. The act of fixing a woman’s body by a male gaze is a form of fetishism: by framing the “object”, the female body is changed from something active (and therefore dangerous) to something inert. The process of photography therefore helps consolidate the traditional subject’s sense of identity. By identifying with his gaze and the camera, Peter becomes a pure act of perception, which allows him to achieve a sense of unity and control. Coherence of vision entails knowledge - the guarantee of the untroubled centrality and unity of the subject.

Peter’s party is a crucial event in the narrative, symbolizing Marian’s entry into femininity, which appears as merely an uncomfortable role she assumes, like the red dress and the mask of make-up.⁹ This moment reveals how

may be found in either gender, and in the same individual at different times (Atwood in Sage, 1994:121-122).

⁸ This point is evident in *The Picture* (1967) by Latifa El-Zayat where the gaze of the blonde woman is threatening the protagonist’s sense of self and relationship with her husband. This gaze is transferred to the camera lens when Amal let the photographer take a picture of her family. The gaze of the camera lens proves to be destructive and exposes the unhappy marriage, and the extinction of the “self” of Amal.

⁹ In *The Ballad of a Sad Café* (1970), Carson McCullers highlights a similar point: the protagonist Amelia Evans also puts on a red dress, significant of a false feminine role. The

“femininity” is a construct of male desire, and effectively portrays the process as a *masquerade*. Even Marian’s friend Duncan, who she invites to the party examines her and says, “You didn’t tell me (the party) was a masquerade ... Who the hell are you supposed to be?” (EW, 239). Marian experiences a fragmentation of identity when she dresses for Peter’s party, and the dress, make-up and accessories makes her feel detached from herself. Her fragmented subjectivity is symbolized by her projection into the two dolls on her dressing table:

She saw herself in the mirror between them for an instant as though she was inside them, inside both of them at once, looking out: herself, a vague damp form in a rumpled dressing-gown, not quite focussed, the blonde eyes noting the arrangement of her hair, her bitten fingernails, the dark one looking deeper, at something she could not quite see, the two overlapping images drawing further and further away from each other ... By the strength of their separate visions they were trying to pull her apart (EW, 219).

The blonde doll recognises Marian’s discomfort in a feminine role, and the dark haired doll is looking for Marian’s “self”, which is starting to disappear.

Another metaphor for Marian’s role as future wife, is the cake she bakes at the end of the novel. Because Peter associates her with objects, she decides to give him exactly that: an object to devour and assimilate. She uses the cake as a visual metaphor for herself: “Her image was taking shape. Eggs. Flour ...” (EW, 267). When the cake is baked, she thinks, “The image is complete” (EW, 270). She regards the cake as a substitute for herself (EW, 270) embodying those notions of “femininity” that she rejects but Peter likes: women wearing chunky earrings, a tight red dress, nails done, a glossy mouth and intricate hair¹⁰. She casts these elements into the cake, and makes it a mirror image of herself. She describes the face of the cake as “doll-like” and “vacant” (EW, 270). Once the cake is finished Marian comments that it looks very appetising: “that’s what you get for being food” (EW, 270). Marian agrees that if she offers

putting on of the red dress is paralleled by her sudden submissiveness and inferiority to males. The change from overalls to the red dress signifies Amelia’s loss of power. As Atwood, McCullers seems to suggest that the assuming of a male projected feminine role, signified by the wearing of a red dress, would render one powerless.

¹⁰ Marian’s refusal to be an “edible woman” is the refusal to conform to Peter’s idea of femininity. Marian’s link between sex and eating is also seen in *Nana* (1880) by Zola. Of Nana, a bystander says “She’s got curves in all the right places! She looks good enough to eat” (Nana, 16).

the cake to Peter and he finds it ridiculous, she might continue their relationship. But if he is disgusted by the cake, then her suspicions that he wants to devour her are confirmed. He is indeed offended and disgusted and left very quickly. Marian has previously been unable to pinpoint the precise reason of her resentment of Peter since their engagement. It is only now that she realises that Peter wants to “assimilate” her (EW, 271).

Marian’s resistance to being absorbed into the stereotype of the wife is thus enacted at a non-verbal level by offering Peter’s ideas of femininity to him in the form of a cake instead of using language. The narrator states: “What she needed was something that avoided words, she didn’t want to get tangled up in a discussion” (EW, 267). She calls this offering a “test”, simple and direct as litmus paper” (EW, 267).

After Peter has left and their engagement has been broken off, Marian is able to return to her former self. Her return to herself is emphasised by the narrative device of the first person narrator. As Peter’s fiancée, she has been detached from her former self – a detachment reflected in the third person narration. She is now able to see herself as a subject, with clear boundaries – an “I” that is different from objects. The source domain (food and objects) and the target domain (Marian) are separated and they cease to be a metaphor. The cake becomes metaphorical for the “feminine” (decorative and passive) aspects of Marian that are in opposition to her “core”. Once she rejects the traditional role of the wife, she can be herself again¹¹.

Marian rejects the choices available to her friends and colleagues because the choices available to her, as well as to any other “young woman, even a young educated woman ... are highly unsatisfactory” (EW, Introduction). She questions stereotypical notions of femininity embodied in other female characters such as Clara, Ainsley and the “office virgins”. She knows that Peter’s projects his ideas of femininity onto her and therefore, she finds it crucial to define the boundaries between her and Peter - between “Self” and “Other”, in order to assert an alternative identity. The “Other” (the conventional

¹¹ Freud (1923:36) recognises a parallel to the replacement of an object by means of identification in the beliefs of “primitive” peoples who believes that the attributes of the animals, which are assimilated as nourishment, survive as part of the character of the persons who eat it. This belief is one of the roots of cannibalism, and is an example of oral mastery of the object.

notion of femininity) is seen as a threat that has the power to transform the Self (Marian) into an object. Peter makes her aware of the conventional gender roles to which she should conform in order to become his wife.

4.2.1.3 Ainsley

Marian's roommate, Ainsley Tewce, is eager to embrace the "ideal" of femininity that includes the role of the wife and the mother. The reader is first aware of Ainsley's desire to be a mother when she "unexpectedly" offers to hold Clara's baby. It is unexpected, because according to Marian, Ainsley does not conform to the stereotype of the mother nor the wife as she never cleans up and generally does not fit into the domestic sphere. In addition, Ainsley is coquettish, has multiple sexual partners and discusses her partner's ability in bed the next morning (EW, 23). She has a "wild" impulsive nature, drinks too much and is excessively concerned about her appearance.

Nevertheless, Ainsley makes distressed attempts to find a man in order to conceive a child, since she is convinced that she must become a mother. When she hears Leonard Slank's name for the first time, she immediately wants to know who he is and what he looks like. She is determined to have a baby and tells Marian that soon, she will be a mother.

Ainsley is adamantly anti-marriage and believes that single motherhood will strengthen her identity, her independence and her ability to "cope" by herself. She is only interested in a man of "decent heredity", who is "fairly good looking" and who will not "make a fuss about marrying her" (EW, 42) after she gives birth to her baby. Despite her anti-marital sentiments, she believes that every woman should have "at least one baby" (EW, 40) in order to fulfil her own deepest femininity. She thus believes in biological essentialism, favoured by patriarchal thought, which keeps women in an inferior position.

Ainsley seems more unconventional in her outlook: she promotes the rights of single parenting (for women) and she believes that having a father would give her child complexes. At the same time, she believes that it is every woman's responsibility to have children, to earn her own money to look after them. Although her single parenting views seem unconventional, they are also impractical, since she has to assume a superfemale role, taking care of all the financial and nurturing aspects. According to Ainsley, the father does not have

any responsibility towards his children. When Marian points out the impracticality of her theory, Ainsley replies that Marian always thinks in terms of “either/or”, in opposition to “wholeness” (EW, 41). She makes theoretical generalisations and then applies them to her own life, regardless of their practicality.

In order to seduce Len, she pretends to be much younger than she actually is, since she has heard that Len likes younger girls. She assumes the role of the young girl by wearing a pink and light blue check on white summer dress – a dress Marian has never seen before. She ties her hair behind her head in a schoolgirl style, wears understated eye shadow to make her eyes look twice as large, round and blue. She bites off her long nails to give them a jagged school girlish quality. When Len speaks with her, she gives short shy answers, lowering her eyes. Marian calls this “the latest version of Ainsley” – “a plump doll in the stores at Christmas time” (EW, 68), with washable rubber-smooth skin and glassy eyes. Marian thus compares the image of the young girl with that of a doll that is for sale. The words “latest version” implies that there are other “versions” of femininity that Ainsley may assume. The image of the young girl is also the “version” that Peter approves of when he asks Marian to behave “properly”, like Ainsley.

By choosing Len as the target-father for her child, she reverses the traditional binary opposition of the woman as passive (hunted) and the man as active (hunter). Marian thinks of the room where they conceive the baby as a trophy room with stuffed and antlered heads nailed to the walls (EW, 122). She sees Ainsley as “young and inexperienced as a button mushroom but was in reality a scheming super female carrying out a foul plot against Len, using him as an inexpensive substitute for artificial insemination with a devastating lack of concern for his individuality” (EW, 122). The gender roles are indeed (temporarily) reversed: after conceiving the baby, Ainsley ignores and avoids Len. However, the gender roles are not completely reversed for she still had to comply to the stereotypes of the young girl and the sex object, in order to win Len’s affection. And it worked.

Regardless of her previous views on marriage, in the end Ainsley decides to get married. She tries to persuade Len to marry her “unless he wants a

homosexual son" (EW, 213)¹². It is clear that she does not make up her own mind about matters, but is readily influenced by what she reads. She changes her viewpoint according to the latest information she acquires. It is obvious that she gets her ideas from textbooks, for instance when she accuses Len of displaying the "classic symptoms of uterus envy".

Thus, Ainsley is more traditional than meets the eye: she is indecisive and impulsive which are according to Spender (1981:35) stereotypical characteristics of women. She conforms to the physical "feminine" stereotype by always wearing make-up, fashionable chunky earrings and nail polish on her long nails. Ainsley has all the mixtures and instruments from the jumble of beauty ads that cover her dressing table. She also displays a professional efficiency with which to manipulate Marian's features when she helps her apply make-up for Peter's party. Impulsively, in the end, Ainsley marries Fischer Smythe and by so doing, conforms to the role of the wife and the mother.

4.2.2 The wife in *The Handmaid's Tale*

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, fertile women are a scarce resource, and therefore, the Commanders design the Republic of Gilead to ensure that they have near exclusive access to fertile women, the so-called Handmaids. Sexual activity is strictly regulated and monitored in order to control the population. By controlling the opportunities to satisfy desire, the Commanders ensure that men of low status will not rebel as the promise of promotion for loyalty to the regime carries with it the promise of wives. The Commanders also enforce harsh penalties for unorthodox satisfaction of sexual desire, including homosexuality and pornography. Between the threat of punishment and rewards for obedience, low-status men work in favour of high-status men.

Marriage is completely arranged and it is mothers, not fathers who "give away" their white-veiled daughters. At a wedding ceremony, Offred observes that these "girls are stuck" in their roles as Wives. If they cannot "produce" (children), the Angels, whom they are marrying will qualify for Handmaids. The

¹² Ainsley refers to Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex, which accounts for heterosexuality in a child. According to this theory, a split away from the mother and identification with the father determines heterosexual orientation.

Wives are not even expected to love their new husbands, only to do their "duty" in silence. Receiving a wife, even a sterile one, is a reward for loyalty. The speech at the wedding ceremony, given by a Commander, emphasises the wife's duty in marriage:

I will that women adorn themselves in modest apparel ...
 with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array¹³;
 But with good works.
 Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection ...
 But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.
 For Adam was first formed, then Eve.
 And Adam (sic) was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.
 Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety (HT, 233).

This excerpt highlights the "ideals" towards which women should strive in Gilead. She must wear "modest" functional clothes without paying attention to her appearance, she must be silent and subjected to her husband, she is a second class citizen and will only be saved by having children.

Although Serena Joy is the official Wife of the Commander, the Handmaid, Offred as well as the Marthas - Rita and Cora - fulfil traditionally wifely duties. The Marthas¹⁴ cook, clean the house and take care of the children while the Handmaids assume the Wives' role during sex. Serena Joy only takes care of her garden, and according to Offred, many of the Wives have such gardens. It is the only thing for them to maintain and care for. According to Offred, Serena Joy is an erstwhile religious-revivalist who used to have her own Television show in which she used to sing and make speeches about the women's place in the domestic sphere. Now, Gileadean law limits her to the domestic sphere and it does not seem to agree with her anymore.

¹³ Similarly, in *Jane Eyre* (1847), the much-hated Mr. Brocklehurst, treasurer and manager of Lowood Institution, the charity school for orphans, claims "my mission is to mortify these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shame-facedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel..." (JE, 56).

¹⁴ The Marthas are based on the biblical Martha, sister of Mary who decides to serve instead of listening to Jesus's teachings. She becomes upset because Mary leaves her to do all the work, and she asks Jesus to reprimand Mary. Instead, Jesus replies that Mary has done the correct thing (Luke 10, 38-41). Martha thus serves with a bad attitude, and similarly, the Marthas in *The Handmaid's Tale* often complain about their chores.

The Commander justifies the oppressive regime by asserting that Gilead has solved the crimes committed against women such as rape and the difficulties of single parenthood. He asks Offred: "You're an intelligent person, I like to hear what you think. What did we overlook?" (HT, 231). Offred replies with one word - *love*. Marriage, for Offred, means companionship, friendship and freedom, whereas Gilead regards it as an instrument of controlling reproduction.

4.2.3 The wife in *The Blind Assassin*

In *The Blind Assassin*, the protagonist Iris (Chase) Griffen, and her sister-in-law Winifred (Griffen) Prior are both wives, although both Iris and Winifred attach new meanings to the stereotypical concept of the wife. The stereotype of the wife often includes attributes of the lady. In *The Blind Assassin*, this stereotype includes passivity, having taste in clothing, and an abundance of leisure time¹⁵.

Popular images of idle rich clubwomen, playing at social work, pampered wives who "entertain" and do not work, show that the stereotype of the lady or grande dame is still alive.

4.2.3.1 Iris

Iris Chase is the main narrator and protagonist of *The Blind Assassin* and is determined to write down her past before she passes away. She is an eighty-three year old widow who suffers from a heart condition. Her writing expresses

¹⁵ Madame Bovary bases her identity on literary ideals of the lady; on romantic pictures of girls reclining on sofas with an open letters beside them, gazing dreamily at the moon. She devours literature about love and lovers, damsels in distress, gloomy forests, sobs, tears, kisses, rowing-boats in the moonlight, gentlemen brave as lions and gentle as lambs, invariably well-dressed (MB, 1972:50-51). She sees herself in the role of the lady, and her lover in the role of the perfect gentleman. She measures her husband against these ideals, and finds him falling short. The ideals of the lady and the gentleman disillusion her with the reality of marriage; her husband, Charles Bovary irritates her because he does not resemble stereotypical romantic heroes. Madame Bovary is "a real lady of style". She is the "woman in love of all the novels, the heroine of all drama, the shadowy "she" of all poetry-books". She possesses "feminine elegance", has the grace of a lady and a quiet taste in dress. She is the "Odalisque bathing" (MB, 276). She sees her lover as a phantom, an ideal man, made of memory, what she had read, and her longings (MB, 301). The incompatibility of the ideals with reality destroys her in the end. Madame Bovary finds that romantic ideals are based on lies: "... all was lies! Every smile concealed a yawn of boredom, every joy a misery ... and the loveliest kisses only left upon your lips are baffled longing for a more intense delight" (MB, 1972:295).

the hope of reconciliation with her granddaughter, Sabrina, who has been taken away from Iris by her sister in law, Winifred (Griffen) Prior after Iris's husband, Richard passes away. Iris is the daughter of Captain Norval Chase, President of Chase Industries Ltd., whose factory has burnt down during the depression. Iris is also the wife of Richard Griffen, of Royal Classic Knitwear Industries and a prospective politician. Iris marries Richard out of obligation to her father and her sister, in order to save her father's factory from financial ruin. By so doing she secures a future for her sister Laura and herself, but also fulfils the promise she gives her mother that she will look after Laura. Richard will act as Laura's guardian after the marriage, securing her an education at one of the best private schools. Her decision to marry Richard is thus selfless as it will also prevent their prestigious family-house in Avilion from being sold on auction. Moreover, her father's financial difficulties affects his health negatively, and by marrying Richard, Iris "does what she thinks is right, for her father" (BA, 290)¹⁶ and "what I (Iris) want isn't the point ... It's the only sensible thing" (BA, 289).

Iris sacrifices herself, not for her husband or children, but for her father and sister. Laura observes that Iris should not get married because she is too young. Moreover, she should marry for love otherwise her marriage will never be happy. She pleads with Iris to consider alternatives to marriage, such as waitressing. From Laura's point of view, Iris is letting her down, and she should cancel the wedding. She does not understand that Iris is sacrificing herself for her family.

Iris is disillusioned with her own engagement and wedding ceremony nonetheless. She compares the ceremonies – the cocktail parties, teas, bridal showers, and the portraits taken for the papers - to her mother's wedding, in the stories told by Reenie, but her own was "backwards somehow and with pieces missing. Where was the romantic prelude, with the young man kneeling

¹⁶ A woman sacrificing her self by getting married to a man she did not love or even like in order to save her father is also the theme of *Beauty and the Beast*. Beauty marries the Beast in order to spare her father's life, and in the end, she looks beyond his physical ugliness and sees the Beast's gentle nature. She falls in love with him, and marries him. After the marriage, he transforms into a handsome man. Iris's situation is reversed: she does not love or even like the handsome man who will save her father's factory. After their marriage, it turns out that he has a hideously violent, dishonest and greedy personality. They divorce and live unhappily ever after.

at my feet?" (BA, 286). By comparing her wedding to that of her mother, she contemplates the possibility that for her mother too, there might have been "pieces missing" (BA, 286) implying that her mother might also have had no other alternatives to marriage. Iris was eighteen when she married Richard, and her mother was nineteen when she married her husband.

Not only is "the piece" of the romantic prelude missing, the wedding is missing too, at least in Iris's memory. Looking back at the wedding picture, Iris cannot remember attending it at all. She describes the wedding photograph in the third person, referring to herself as "her" and "a young woman" instead of "me" or "I". The narrative technique also reflects the split in subjectivity Iris experiences after the wedding:

A young woman in a white satin dress cut on the bias ... In her case beauty was mandatory, with so much money involved ... (I say 'her', because I don't recall having been present, not in any meaningful sense of the word. I and the girl in the picture have ceased to be the same person. I am her outcome, the result of the life she once lived headlong; whereas she, if she can be said to exist at all, is composed only of what I remember. I have the better view – I can see her clearly, most of the time. But even if she knew enough to look, she can't see me at all) (BA, 292).

Iris uses parenthesis to insert this thought in her narrative, marking a jump in the flow of her memory. After reflecting on her divided identity as before and after the wedding, her narration returns to the first person. For Iris, conforming to the stereotype of the wife entails a split in subjectivity – a distancing of her present self from her former self – the girl in the picture. A distancing from the girl who was not able to see clearly enough.

The day after the wedding, Richard and Iris depart on a train trip to New York. They dine at an expensive modern restaurant with friends of Richard. The sculptures in the restaurant seem to be metaphors for Iris and her inescapable situation: "Sculptures of stylised women in brass or steel, smooth as taffy, with eyebrows but no eyes, with streamlined haunches and no feet, with arms melting back into their torsos ..." (BA, 296). This is a metaphor of her former self, who could not see clearly enough. As the statue, she seems to have no feet as she is unable to "run away", as Laura suggests they should do. Run away and leave a note in order to avoid the wedding. Iris's arms

metaphorically “melts back into her torso”, since she is unable to do anything about her unhappy state in marriage.

After a few days they depart on ship for Europe, and Iris becomes terribly seasick. At night, they are entertained by professional dancers and tango acts. Iris describes the music as “jagged, hobbled – like a four-legged animal lurching on three legs” (BA, 299) and the dance as a battle. The dancers eye each other, wait for a chance to bite, and both look wounded (BA, 299). The next day, Iris stands on the deck, feeling alone and neglected “as if I had a broken heart” (BA, 300). She looks at the rolling of the waves while trying to remember something she might have read about an ocean, but could not. “Break, break, break. Something began that way” (BA, 300).

It was a poem by Tennyson, read by Iris and Laura in Mrs Violence’s class:

Break, break, break,
On the cold gray stones, O Sea!
And I would that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me

The poem, like the wedding picture, alludes to Iris’s former self as a young girl before her marriage. As a child, Iris skims the poem, and finds that nothing interesting happens in it. However, after her marriage, it suddenly seems important enough to remember, and even applicable to her present situation. It is her “self” that is breaking and fragmenting. The allusion to the poem thus highlights her divided self between Iris as young girl, and Iris as wife (BA, 297). The words “So this is marriage, I thought” (BA, 297) is followed by her words “So this is the ocean, I thought” (BA, 300).

4.2.3.2 Winifred

On meeting Winifred for the first time at a dinner party at Avilion Iris first thoughts are that Winifred is Richard’s wife. Later, she realises that she is his sister, but does not know whether she is married, widowed, or divorced. Winifred’s husband is seldom mentioned and never seen, but he is supposed to have a lot of money and to be “travelling” (BA, 227). It is therefore clear that Winifred and her husband are not very close.

Winifred does wifely things for Richard instead like organising social events, doing his shopping, decorating Richard and Iris’s house, but never mentions

her own house or husband. Iris also knows that Winifred has planned the wedding. Winifred has even chosen Iris's engagement ring.

Winifred tells Iris that she and Richard are "such great pals" (BA, 283). This is meant as a threat: Winifred is Richard's real collaborator, and will always be.

Not only does Winifred shop for house decorations, engagement rings, but also it seems that she even "shops" for a wife for her brother. She sees a marriage between Iris and Richard as an advantage, because it will increase his chances in his political career as he will appear like a trustworthy family man, married to a young, beautiful wife from a very prominent family. What Iris does not realise at that time is that Richard in all probability burnt down her father's factory in order to force him into financial ruin. He then merges it with his own, naming it Griffen-Chase Royal Consolidated (it is thus not coincidental that his surname is "Griffen", since a griffin is a kind of vulture). The marriage will be an advantage to Winifred because Iris is very young and inexperienced, which renders her less likely to oppose Winifred. Iris's youthfulness leaves Winifred thus in total control (BA, 284).

The relationship between Winifred and Richard is highlighted when they visit Iris in the hospital after the birth of Iris's baby, Aimee. The nurses assume Winifred and Richard are Iris's parents. This assumption also draws attention to Winifred's absent husband, and her own unsatisfactory marriage.

Winifred's wifely attributes include that of the lady. She desperately tries to fulfil this stereotype by playing at social work as a "noted philanthropist", serves on several boards, such as the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, on the Volunteer Committee of the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Canadian Cancer Society and others. Winifred makes sure that she is seen at the right places and invites Iris to lunch at the Arcadian Court, where "the ladies lunch" (BA, 281). She tells Iris that she "absolutely lives" in the Arcadian Court, meaning that she is very much a lady. Winifred wears fashionable clothing and make-up, and assures that Iris understands that her clothing "cost a mint". Iris realises that Winifred is not the lady she makes herself out to be and even their first meeting at the Arcadian Court convinces Iris that Winifred's attempts to be stylish are cheap. The Arcadian Court, which Winifred adores, seems to be a reflection of her status as a lady. According to Iris, it is "said to be

“Byzantine” in design. It is obviously a Byzantine imitation, as Winifred is an imitation of a lady.

Winifred only participates in events for her public image, for instance, she plays golf, but plays it only for the social contacts. Tennis is too strenuous for her because she does not want to be “caught” sweating. She “sails”, which to her means sitting on a cushion on a boat, sipping a drink.

Despite Winifred’s attempts to conceal her lack of style, it is nevertheless noticed. Iris notices Winifred’s unpopularity and the fact that she is only tolerated as a “noted socialite” because of her financial contributions and because she does most of the work involved in social functions.

Guests at social functions hint to Iris that Winifred is an *arriviste* – that she is new money, brass and vulgar – and that Iris is the real lady and should stand up to Winifred (BA, 454). The guests also note the fact that the stereotype of the lady depends on social class when they elaborate on the style that Iris’s grandmother had exhibited, before the Great War (World War One), “when true elegance had still been possible”. However, when lunching at the Arcadian Court, Winifred attempts to convince that Iris that she lacks finesse, and that she is unforthcoming and ignorant. Winifred points out that the Montfort women had been celebrated for their style, but of course, Adelia Montfort (Iris’s grandmother) had died before Iris had been born. “This was her way of saying that despite my pedigree we were in effect starting from scratch” (BA, 285) in making her a lady for Richard.

Iris possesses values that Winifred lacks: “... she was doing something I had been taught never to do because it was cheap: she was looking at her face in the mirror of her compact, in public. Worse, she was powdering her nose” (BA, 282).

The fact that Iris marries Richard in order to save her father’s business, to secure Laura’s future, and to prevent the house in Avilion from being sold, proves that she has qualities beyond that of the *arriviste*.

Winifred wants Iris and Laura to imitate her idea of a lady. To her, Iris is a lump of clay which she can mould in any shape (BA, 285). Winifred has similar aspirations for Laura and enlists her in one of her causes in a volunteer organisation called “The Abigails” (an Abigail is a lady’s-maid), consisting of girls of good families, training to be future Winifreds. They are supposed to do

hospital rounds, talk to patients, read to them and to cheer them up. However, Laura naturally gravitates towards the poverty wards that the other Abigails avoid. The ward contains derelicts including old women with dementia, noseless men with tertiary syphilis and the like. Laura's duties include the emptying of bedpans containing abject substances – a far cry from Winifred's ideals. According to Winifred Laura is especially good with the hopeless cases. She does not seem to register that these patients are dying as she treats their condition as normal. To Winifred, this is a sign of her dissimilarity to other people, although some nurses think she is an angel. Laura does not like the other Abigails since she takes her hospital work seriously instead of regarding it as a mere opportunity to climb the social ladder. By so doing, Laura subverts the stereotype of the idle lady altogether.

4.3 The stereotype of the mother

According to Spender (1980:54), society has legitimated meaning for motherhood as feminine fulfilment. The images of motherhood vary according to social context and time and when women are expected to stay home and care for children, the image of a mother who does not is tarnished. Stereotypes operate on the principle of binary oppositions and the stereotype of the mother is no exception.

In Greek mythology, Pandora (Greek for All-giving), the first woman, is sent to earth by the gods to marry and establish the human race, bringing with her a magic box. This box contains all kinds of misery and evil and when Pandora opens the box, all manner of evils flies out over the earth. Hope alone remains inside - the lid having been shut before she could escape. If Pandora had passively obeyed divine law, humanity would have been spared the suffering and pain. In this myth, except for the action of a woman, humans would have been godlike. Because of a woman, humankind is condemned to mortality. This myth highlights woman's dual nature and attempts to explain primordial reactions to her double role as the giver of life and death, of pleasure and of pain (Ferguson, 1987:113). This dual nature consists of the image of the "Great Mother" who is also the "Terrible Mother"; the giver of life and all its joys is also the one who brings pain and death. Atwood portrays the mother's body during pregnancy as amorphous and fluid. Pregnancy and motherhood are

closely identified with a body that changes in shape, and in space. This change usually entails a new relation to the world (Deery, 1997:5).

4.3.1 *The Edible Woman*

The stereotype of the mother includes being supportive, nurturing and often entails being confined to the domestic realm (Savitt, 1982:6). Atwood deconstructs this stereotype in *The Edible Woman* by associating these qualities with Trevor and emphasises that these qualities are not exclusive to wives and mothers. Qualities of the lady, which include having style, elegance and a concern about social class also manifests in Trevor.

Trevor is the housemate of Duncan and Fish, and has nurturing attributes. According to Duncan, his housemates are “bores”, and Trevor is the “motherbore” (EW, 54). For instance, he is shocked to find Duncan without a T-shirt with a girl (Marian) in his room. On having coffee with Duncan at the museum coffee shop, spotting Trevor, Marian remarks “there’s one of your parents” (EW, 191). Duncan proceeds to greet Trevor, and Trevor invites Marian for dinner – something the reader can see a mother doing when seeing her son with an unfamiliar woman.

Trevor delights in entertaining his guests and preparing the food, making modest excuses about the dinner not being anything fancy. On complimenting him on his sherry glasses, he happily exclaims that he also regards them as very elegant and takes pride of the fact that it has been in the family for years. This is also unconventional, since a prized culinary heirloom will traditionally be passed on to daughters. Trevor laments the fact that there is so little elegance left in the world (EW, 193). He thoughtfully sets the table and arranges the silverware and dishes on the white tablecloth. He delights in another compliment by Marian about his silverware, and adds that he prepares his own sauces, since “these bottled things” (EW, 196) are standardised. Trevor shares his soup recipes with Marian, making it clear that he does things in a traditional fashion by extracting essences at a very low heat.

Trevor’s nurturing qualities are contrasted with Peter who wants Marian to do the cooking and entertaining, since “women are so much better at arranging things on plates” (EW, 227).

Qualities traditionally associated with women seem to add to Trevor's personality whereas notions of motherhood often engulf the woman character's personality. For example, according to Marian, Clara " ... was being dragged slowly into the gigantic pumpkin-like growth that was enveloping her body ..." and "... now that Clara was deflating towards her normal size again she would be able to talk with her more freely: she would no longer feel as though she was addressing a swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead ... a semi-person ..." (EW, 115). When the baby is born, Marian will buy Clara a "welcoming-back gift for the real Clara, once more in uncontended (*sic*) possession of her own frail body" (EW, 115).

Although *The Edible Woman* includes the traditional stereotype of the mother as embodied by Clara, it highlights that these qualities can be fluid, extending the boundaries of gender.

4.3.2 *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Handmaids embody the notion of *Tota mulier in utero* (a woman is nothing but a womb). They are not mothers, but passive breeding grounds, limited to fixed roles as wombs. Offred's identity is "fixed" by her reproductive role rather than by motherhood. The Republic of Gilead allows Offred only one function: to procreate. If she deviates from this role of child-bearer, she will, like all the dissenters, be hanged at the wall or sent to the colonies to die slowly of radiation sickness. Offred says, "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (HT, 82).

She is a mere vessel for procreation, whereas the Wife of the Commander will be considered the mother. If Offred is able to fall pregnant, the child will be confiscated from her as soon as it is weaned. It is for this reason that it is difficult to call Offred a mother. Her desire to have children is based only on survival. The rulers of Gilead draw directly from the Old Testament in the Bible, justifying the Commander's polygamy and the existence of the Handmaids. Jacob's wife, Rachel, is infertile, so she urges him to have children by her servant, Bilhah. According to Offred, "the mouldy old Rachel and Leah stuff" (HT, 99) has been drummed into them at the Red Centre: "Give me children or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from

thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (HT, 99). "And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband¹⁷" (HT, 101). Whenever the Commander reads the above verses from the Bible, Serena Joy starts crying. She always cries the night of the Ceremony.

The Ceremony is the night that Offred must be impregnated by the Commander, in the hope of conceiving a child for him and his Wife. The Ceremony takes place on Serena Joy's colonial-style four-poster bed. Offred holds Serena Joy's hands, signifying that they are one in flesh, and that Serena Joy is in control of the process and the "product" if any. Serena Joy holds her hands so tight that her wedding ring cuts into Offred's fingers, as a way of showing her disapproval. Offred, as Bilhah does not have a say in her own body, since they are both slave-girls. Rachel is a woman who proposes the use of another woman's body for her own purposes, planning to take Bilhah's children for herself. As Rachel, Serena Joy will take Offred's child for herself. Even the birth-procedures are simulated by the Wife. Both the Handmaid and the Wife sit on the Birthing Stools and the baby is given to the wife immediately after its birth.

The Wife of the Commander is thus considered the child's mother although she is not the biological mother. Not every Commander receives a Handmaid as some of the Wives are able to conceive their own children, and for this reason Serena Joy feels bitter towards Offred. However, Serena Joy suspects that her husband is sterile and arranges secret meetings between Offred and Nick, the family chauffeur, in the hope of conceiving a child. These meetings are kept secret since Gilead do not believe that men can be sterile. Their meetings have to be kept secret, because all unauthorised communication, whether it is talking, writing or sex, is prohibited in Gilead, with death as the penalty.

This complex situation makes it difficult to consider either Serena Joy or Offred the "true" wife/mother. After some time, the Commander demands to have secret meetings with Offred. During those meetings he allows her to read, to

¹⁷ The biblical verses the Commander reads on the night of the Ceremony is found in Genesis 30:1-3. According to the Bible (1982) when the surrogate gives birth, she actually sits on the knees of the wife, which symbolises the wife providing a child for her husband.

write and to play Scrabble with him. She is even able to ask him questions about Gilead and himself. This is an activity from which Serena Joy is excluded. Their relationship seems to exist only on a very formal level. For this reason, Offred seems to have a more “normal” relationship with the Commander than Serena Joy does.

According to the Commander, the previous regime did not respect women as mothers. The Handmaids are told that the old society was immoral and unstable, since women suffered harassment, rape, and murder. Single women had extreme difficulties in supporting their children since the corporate world discriminated against women. Husbands could leave at the drop of a hat and leave the wife to care for their children alone. The state of Gilead (according to the Commander) ensures that women are valued and protected, and that proper care is provided for children. Many women have also been abused by husbands and boyfriends (HT, 231) and Gilead provides protection by stoning these criminals in public.

The new society of Gilead claims to have solved all of these problems and women are led to believe that freedom and independence are not much of a price to pay for the benefits of safety and security. Of course, as the Commander notices, “better” never means better for everyone. It means worse for some. In the name of making society better, a small number of privileged individuals secure power and status for themselves

Offred envies the pregnant women she sees on her daily walks, and calls them as a “triumphant flag on a hilltop” (HT, 36). However, she also compares their pregnant bellies with food, as “a huge fruit” (HT, 36), which will be devoured by the Gileadean rulers. Her lack of power is emphasised she compares herself to a chicken when the doctor examines her: “I am poked and prodded” (HT, 70). Offred also draws an analogy between her body and fruit: “My breasts are fingered in their turn, a search for ripeness, rot” (HT, 70). “Ripeness” off course, indicates pregnancy, and “rot” cancer.

Aunt Lydia compares women with meat and comments on the “spectacles” women used to make of themselves by wearing swimsuits on the beaches before Gilead came into power. Women were “oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit” (HT, 65). Two contrary views are provided: the Commander and Aunt Lydia’s view that women are more free in Gilead and not treated as

objects, and Offred's feelings as an object. It is thus evident that women are compared to food both inside and outside the borders of Gilead, which indicate that their position has not changed for the better.

The Handmaid's Tale is a cautionary tale. It touches on the dangers of making unquestioned assumptions about gender relations, even within feminist movements. It warns against making unitary judgments about gender and then infusing them with moral and societal imperatives. Even more importantly, it points out the methods through which power is abused, and these methods are not exactly unfamiliar.

4.3.3 *The Blind Assassin*

The Blind Assassin presents the reader with five characters who are mothers. These mothers include Iris's grandmother Adelia Montfort, Iris and Laura's mother, Reenie, Iris herself, and her daughter Aimee who gives birth to Sabrina.

Iris's mother appears to conform to the stereotypical notion of the good mother. She has good family values, is polite and involved in charity work and she possessed nurturing qualities. Although it is a known fact that her husband is involved in extra-marital affairs, she remains silent and prays for the power to forgive (which is a lady like thing to do). Her nurturing qualities are however, directed more towards her husband than towards her children. When her husband falls ill, she resents the nurses who tend him. She wishes him to owe his recovery to her alone and appears completely selfless and devoted to her husband. However, these motherly qualities do not correspond with the experience Iris has of her mother's love. According to Iris, her mother loves Laura more and "her love for us was a given—solid and tangible, like a cake. The only question was which of us was going to get the bigger slice" (BA, 116).

Iris experiences her mother as an absent presence, as "performing her good deeds elsewhere" whereas "Reenie was always there" (BA, 5). Reenie plays the role of the mother to Iris and Laura, taking care of their physical and emotional needs.

The absence of her mother's love reflects in her mother's dress, which is sky blue. A few days before her death, she also holds Iris steady in her sky-blue

gaze. This gaze signifies the death that she contemplates - her absence from the earth and her departure to heaven. The lack of attention for her children could be attributed to the fact that she has frequently been ill. She "lost resilience" after Laura was born, and it was "as if my former mother had been stolen away by the elves – this older and greyer and saggier and more discouraged one – had been left in her place (BA:105).

Iris admits that the view she has of her mother is be biased when she says "what fabrications they are, mothers. Scarecrows, wax dolls for us to stick pins into, crude diagrams. We deny them an existence of their own, we make them up to suit ourselves – our own hungers, our own wishes, our own deficiencies. Now that I've been one myself, I know (BA:116).

Iris admits that although Reenie claims that she has inherited the hard nature of her father, and Laura has inherited her mother's piety, Iris recognises a resemblance between her mother and herself because she transfers similar feelings of rejection to her daughter Aimee.

When pregnant, Iris describes herself as "a huge grape, swollen to bursting with sugar and purple juice; I felt ugly and cumbersome" (BA, 526). Ironically, she names her daughter "Aimee" - "one who is loved" and "I hoped she would be loved, by someone". (BA, 526). Iris doubts her capacity to love her daughter, because she is spread too thin as it was, there wouldn't be enough love left over for herself.

It is thus not surprising that Aimee thinks Iris is not her biological mother. She believes that Laura is her real mother, but because she was too young when she gave birth to her, Iris and Richard took her to replace the baby that Iris has lost. Iris is not surprised at Aimee's theory either because: "who wouldn't want a mythical being for a mother instead of the shop-soiled real kind? (BA, 531). Aimee thinks that Iris is a terrible, bad mother and that she never really loved her.

After Iris and Richard's divorce, Winifred wins custody over Aimee (as retaliation against Iris for Richard's death) and she makes Aimee believe that Iris is a tramp, a slut, and a bad mother (BA, 625).

Aimee has also transferred her feelings of rejection by her mother Iris, onto her own daughter, Sabrina. Aimee leads a promiscuous life and is also an

alcoholic. She neglects Sabrina, then aged four, by allowing her to play outside untended, dirty, and without food.

Margaret Atwood subverts the stereotype of the mother, by giving characters who are not mothers, traditional nurturing qualities of the “good mother”. Reenie plays the role of the mother to Iris and Laura, but she is the housekeeper, not the mother. Iris, who is Laura’s sister, but who assumes the role of Laura’s mother by promising her mother and father on separate occasions, that she will take care of Laura.

The stereotype of the mother is thus subverted by showing that the characters who are “bad mothers” to their biological children, do in fact have nurturing qualities of the “good mother”. They do not necessarily conform to the “negative” side of the binary opposition of good/terrible mother, because their boundaries are fluid.

4.4 The stereotype of the virgin

A young maiden has traditionally been viewed as asexual, an exalted symbol of purity. A young girl is often viewed as silly, flirtatious, concerned with her sexual attractiveness, interested in cosmetics and clothes, but without any serious sexual desires. Her years of development are seen as if she were asleep and like Sleeping Beauty of the fairy tale, only contact with a man will make her a real person. Though the fairy tale uses a kiss as the means of awakening, it is rape (abduction) that serves as a girl’s rite of passage into adulthood in myths like that of Persephone.

According to Spacks (1975:113) “before marriage, a young girl is brought up to be perfectly innocent and sexually ignorant” and “the predominant ideology of the age insists that she has little sexual feeling at all, although family affection and the desire for motherhood are considered innate”. Innocence and ignorance are often considered virtues of young fictional heroines. Authors concentrating on the adolescent heroine often confront tangled psychic issues and the making of crucial choices. Marriage is the “normal” conclusion, the orthodox way for a young girl to declare herself adult. This stage is the young woman’s only period of freedom, when she is released from the restrictions of childhood, but does not experience yet those of wifedom and motherhood.

The stereotype of the maiden girl often spills over into the stereotype of the woman on a pedestal. Outside marriage, a beautiful woman may be exalted so that her beauty makes her seem superhuman and therefore exonerates men who fall victim to her power. The image of the passive, beautiful woman can be compared to the male ideal of the hero. In most literature, male heroes who fall short of their dream are considered autonomous agents and their failure is seen as tragic, but women who fail are viewed as pathetic rather than tragic. Women who serve as inspiration to noble action do so because of their beauty, not because of any action or achievement of their own.

4.4.1 *The Edible Woman*

Marian's colleagues at Seymour Surveys are examples of women who focus on their beauty and purity in order to serve as man's inspiration. The artificial blonde trio, the "office virgins", are Lucy, Emmy and Millie and they represent stereotypical notions of frustrated femininity. Portrayed as victims of puritanical middle class attitudes, they reflect the negative view of sexually active unmarried women in the sixties. They confide in Marian the fact that they are all virgins, albeit for different reasons. Millie's virginity is informed by a "solid girl-guide practicality" which holds the view that "it in the long run it's better to wait until you're married" (EW, 22). Lucy's reason is a social quailing "What would people say?" (EW, 22) and Emmy, the office hypochondriac believes that it would make her sick. They are looking for husbands and do wish to get married however. According to Marian, the "office virgins" are at the first stage of femininity. Marian views femininity as a pendulum process, consisting of an early, middle and later stage. The early stage is compared to an unripe ear of corn or fruit, in which one is still "green". One then ripens and becomes mature. Her other colleagues (Mrs. Grot and Mrs. Gundridge) wear dresses for the mature figure, except for Lucy, who is merely at an early stage: a springtime green nodule forming beneath the careful golden calyx of hair. The "office virgins" are at the early stage, still thin and elegant. At the mature stage, one becomes like Mrs. Gundridge (Marian's colleague who has been married for some time) with fat, "ham-like bulge of thighs, creases around the neck, large porous cheeks" (EW, 167). She also has "dune-like contours of breast and waist and hip; their fluidity sustained somewhere within by bones,

without by a carapace of clothing and makeup" EW, 167). Marian draws an analogy between eating and femininity, since both involve a continual flux between the inside and the outside, "by taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potatochips (sic), burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato-juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor tears and garbage ..." (EW, 167).

Marian feels that she is already conforming to her colleagues: her body the same, identical, merged with that other flesh that choked the air in the flowered room with its sweet organic scent; she felt suffocated by this thick Sargasso-sea of femininity ... she wanted something solid, clear: a man; she wanted Peter in the room so that she could put her hand out and hold on to him to keep from being sucked down. Lucy had a gold bangle on one arm. Marian focussed her eyes on it, concentrating on it as though she was drawing its hard gold circle around herself, a fixed barrier between herself and that liquid amorphous other (EW, 167).

Marian thus views femininity as unstable, because it entails an imitation, a taking in of images, whereas men are solid and stable. Marian also feels restricted by the role of femininity, because this is the only alternative for her, also in the workplace. She has no prospects of promotion, since she cannot become "one of the men upstairs" (EW, 20), and she cannot become one of the questionnaire marking ladies, as that is a step down. Marian is paralysed by her lack of prospects. Her body rejects becoming "feminine" and she lapses into an anorexic rebellion. In order to preserve herself, her body refuses to take anything in.

Marian's reluctance to conform to the feminine role involves a struggle to retain an independent subjectivity, safe from the predatory attacks of the "Other". She needs to draw a boundary between "Self" and "Other" (Marian and Peter). According to de Beauvoir (1972:159), in order to assert a Self, the "Other" is necessary, since the Self attains itself only through what it is not. In order to achieve self-consciousness and freedom, the idea of the "Other" that has to be negated arises. Marian thus needs Peter as "Other" in order to create a clear boundary between his ideas of femininity and her self. Marian's anorexic symptoms represent a strategy she unconsciously adopts to preserve a sense of self in order to separate her self from the passivity exemplified by the "office virgins".

4.4.2 The virgin/whore in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The literary stereotype of the virgin can be traced to the Virgin Mother, who is chaste, innocent, passive and worshipped (Savitt, 1982:3). The virgin state is often a short transitory state that soon spills into the mother role, which is life giving. This could account for the absence of the virgin in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The state of Gilead is built on reproduction and therefore, the virgin has no economical or political function. *The Handmaid's Tale* refers to the notion of the virgins once, if in the process of getting married. Mass wedding ceremonies are called "Prayvaganzas" in which white veiled women participate in silence. One can extrapolate that these women who are to be married are virgins, because they wear the symbolic white attire and veil, which is traditionally associated with purity.

The opposite of the virgin stereotype is that of the whore. Qualities of this stereotype include pleasure producing and adoration by men in an earthy way. They are seductresses, and "evil" by nature of their sexuality. The whore or sex object fulfils man's sexual needs and is the receptacle of his passions. Once she fulfils this role, she becomes a fallen woman and the man who used her may callously discard her. According to Robbins (2000:50), in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In her traditional role as sex object, a woman's appearance has a strong visual and erotic impact so that she connotes "looked-at-ness". Woman on display as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle, which signifies male desire. The patriarchal state of Gilead retains this stereotype, because it is functional. Sexual pleasure with Wives and Handmaids are forbidden, and the involuntary "whore" provides these pleasures, since, according to the Commander, men "are still human" (HT, 248).

The illicit Scrabble games Offred has to play with the Commander spill into something more illicit: he takes her to "The Club" or "Jezebel's", which is a former hotel, but presently operating as a brothel. "Jezebel's" means "shameless woman" (Ostler, 1987:292), and to become "shameless", Offred has to take off her red Handmaid's attire, and put on a sequined and feathered

garment. The changing of clothes is symbolic of her changing function: she is no longer a “sacred vessel”, but a whore. The dress has cups for breasts and feathers around the thigh holes and low neckline. This emphasises her function as seductress. She also has to take off her flat red shoes, which are supposed to accommodate the swollen feet of a pregnant woman, and put on mauve shoes with “absurdly high heels” (HT, 243). As a Handmaid, she is not allowed to use any cream or make-up, but for her trip to Jezebel’s, she has to put on mascara, eyeliner and lipstick. This transformation is extremely whorish, according to Gilead’s laws which do not allow any naked flesh and vanity. But the Commander even hands Offred a mirror, to look at herself.

Once inside Jezebel’s, the Commander slips an elastic band around Offred’s wrist, which signifies that she is an “evening rental” (HT, 245). The Club is softly lit, with pink and brown decorations. The women in The Club wear outfits similar to Offred’s, or lingerie and see-through negligée.

The Club and the “working girls” are officially forbidden, and even more so is Offred’s presence. Moira (Offred’s best friend before Gilead came to power) concludes that the Commander brings Offred to The Club on purpose, since Handmaids are supposed to be “such chaste vessels” (HT, 225). Offred points out that Handmaids are for breeding purposes and that they are not geisha girls, concubines or courtesans. Everything has been done to remove them from these categories. No room is permitted for them to be sexually attractive, since they are only “two-legged wombs” (HT, 146). However, when Moira first sees Offred, she exclaims that she looks like the “Whore of Babylon” (HT, 254).

By bringing Offred to The Club or “Jezebel’s”, the Commander makes her conform to both sides of the Virgin/Whore dichotomy. She is both “sacred vessel”, but also a whore and this gives the Commander a “crummy power trip” (HT, 255).

4.4.3 The Blind Assassin

From Richard’s attitude and behaviour towards Laura, it is evident that he sees her in the role of the virgin, and the sex object. He is attracted to her beauty and innocence. According to Iris, Laura has tendencies towards absolutism, and a scorn for the grosser human failings and to get away with

that, one has to be beautiful. Otherwise it seems mere peevishness (BA, 352). Reenie has also observed that Laura is different from other people, as she does not care about material things, but concentrates on spiritual issues. Her purity and otherworldliness is emphasised by the verse in her alphabet book:

“L is for Lily,
So pure and so white;
It opens by day,
And it closes at night” (BA, 110).

Laura’s favourite letter is “L” because it is her own letter, the one that begins her name. The image that accompanies the verse is of two children wearing straw bonnets, standing next to a water lily with a fairy sitting on it. Laura seems to associate with the idyllic picture of the innocent young girl and the purity of the water lily. She detaches herself from the corporeal world and mostly cares about spiritual matters. Iris also remarks that Laura touches people, whereas she does not. These characteristics correspond to that of a Pre-Raphaelite tragic heroine who believes strongly in romantic love, and as Ophelia, she commits suicide because of her unrequited love. Her association with Ophelia is dramatised when, as a child, Laura jumps into the Louveteau River and disappears beneath the water. When Iris informs Laura of the fact that she (Iris) and Alex Thomas are lovers, Laura looks the way she had the day she had almost drowned – terrified and cold (BA, 596). After this revelation, Laura walks out of the restaurant, taking with her Iris’s purse and keys. Ophelia finally drowns herself in a river after her lover rejected her, whereas Laura drives off a bridge. Laura’s suicide is one of the mysteries Iris solves in her narrative as she is the only one who knows the reasons for Laura’s suicide.

Not only does Laura conform to the stereotype of the exalted woman on a pedestal, she also becomes Richard’s sex object as he is “besotted” with her and claims to have loved her. Because of the power her innocence has over him, he does not view having sex with her as rape. However, when she falls pregnant he discards her by locking her up in Bella Vista Sanctuary for mentally-ill patients.

Stereotypes for women include the virgin, the wife, and the mother. These stereotypes cast women in the role of a man’s “Other”, and her identity has to

conform to existing representations. The stereotype of the wife entails the notions of unselfishness and subordination to her husband. In *The Edible Woman*, Peter desires to mould Marian according to his ideas of femininity, which includes passivity, wearing feminine clothes, make-up and accessories. Marian rejects Peter's ideas, by devouring the decorated cake.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the stereotype of the wife includes extreme subordination and the wearing of a colour coded uniform. The protagonist, Offred, has to assume some of the "duties" of the Wife, such as sleeping with the husband in the hope of conceiving a child, whereas the Marthas take over "wifely" duties, such as cooking and cleaning. In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood subverts the stereotype of the wife, showing Iris's secret life outside the construct of marriage. Winifred has a failed marriage, and in many ways plays the role of Richard's wife.

The stereotype of the mother also entails a woman's selflessness. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, as a Handmaid, Offred's identity is restricted to a reproductive role. If she should fail to produce children, she will be killed. In *The Blind Assassin*, motherhood is not portrayed as the ultimate fulfilment, as the protagonists have other aspirations to the role of the mother.

The stereotypes of the virgin, the wife and the mother are limiting because they reduce the character's to stereotypes, and cause a fragmentation of the character's subjectivity, since the character has to attempt to conform to external construction of the self. The next section investigates the ways in which the characters' in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Blind Assassin* display fractured and split subjectivities, caused by stereotypes.

Chapter 5

5. THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE BODY IN ATWOOD'S WORKS

Margaret Atwood does not only challenge gender stereotypes but she also questions the notion of the character as a unified subject. *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* question totalising and homogenizing systems, such as dualist thought, and as such, the identities of the protagonists are often decentred (since the centre has been used as a pivot between binary oppositions that always privilege the male half).

Ambivalence in Marian's narrative in *The Edible Woman*, Offred's in *The Handmaid's Tale* and Iris's in *The Blind Assassin*, as well as their fragmented narrative material undermine the concept of a coherent, rational speaking subject. Subsequently, multiple and shifting identities are predominant. The undermining of the unified subject has close affinities to the undermining of notions of authorship, in which the speaking subject is seen as a unity, fully present to him or herself and capable of self-expression through language.

The unstable nature of identity in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* is highlighted by the presence of doubles and encounters between the "Self" and the "Other". These encounters lend a fluid and unstable nature to the character's identities.

The double in literature has been linked to the Romantic idea that a character is mutable rather than fixed. The Doppelgänger figure emerges in *The Edible Woman* in the form of the protagonist's rebellious self¹ and manifests in her friend Duncan. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred and Ofglen are mirroring reflections of one another. In *The Blind Assassin*, Laura and Iris often mirror each other. The device of the double also indicates the character's emergence of the unconscious and as such, highlights the fractured nature of identity. The notion of multiple subjectivity undermines the definition of a character, associated with Realism, that is, a coherent, indivisible and continuous whole.

¹ The motif of the split self is also indicated in *Surfacing* by the appearance of ghosts and shadow selves. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan feels the overweight adolescent Joan to be a shadow of her self.

The characters in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* resist being typecast into rigid gender roles. Consequently, their identities are fractured and perpetually under construction².

5.1.1 *The Edible Woman*

Duncan's function as Marian's double is crucial to her assertion of her "self" by rejecting conventional feminine roles. Duncan is Marian's friend whom she meets through her work as a market researcher at Seymour Surveys. Duncan seems the opposite of Peter from the moment Marian meets him. Unlike Peter, Duncan is not a perfectionist, he is not good looking and is "cadaverously thin" (EW, 148). At their first meeting, Marian is unable to establish his age and estimates him to be fifteen years old, as opposed to his twenty six years of age. She deems his answers to her questionnaire as unconventional and after she has left, she discovers that the notes she has made are indecipherable in the glare of the sunlight. She could only make out an indistinct grey scribbling. This is the first instance where Duncan seems to exist as Marian's projection. After examining the questionnaire, she doubts Duncan's existence and the fact that she has spoken to him. His existence as Marian's projection is evident in their visit to the Museum where "from somewhere the thought drifted into her mind that if she were to reach out and touch him at that moment he would begin to crumble" (EW, 187). At the Museum coffee shop, they encounter Duncan's roommate, who invite them for dinner. When Duncan walks her home after dinner, he seems to blur "almost noiselessly into the blue darkness" (EW, 203).

² Atwood's novels portray the fragmentation of the woman's body and identity as negative since it signifies a loss of identity. However, historically, it has been regarded as positive. Kenneth Clark (1985:10), states that since no individual body is satisfactory as a whole, the artist can choose parts from various figures and combine them into a perfect whole (1965:10). The term "idealism" describes art that reflects for preference nature at its best and most attractive, but attempts to improve and perfect nature by eliminating the inevitable imperfections. The earliest recorded statement of this concept occurs in a conversation between Socrates and the painter Parrhasius, recorded by Xenophon in *Memorabilia*: "And when you would represent beautiful figures" says Socrates, "do you, since it is not easy to find one person with every part perfect, select out of many the most beautiful parts of each, and thus represent figures beautiful in every part? Parrhasius accepts that this is his method. The artist may "improve" then on the world of actuality and he does so in virtue of a composite construction derived from various models. The "product" of fragmentation might be positive, and beautiful, but it recovers the binary structure; those who fragment and construct and those who are being fragmented and constructed.

Similarly, when Marian wants to touch Duncan in the movie theatre, she has a peculiar feeling in her hand. Her hand wants to reach across and touch him on the shoulder, but it seems independent from her body, since she wants to do nothing of this kind. Marian wants to touch him but “she was also afraid, now that she wasn’t looking at him anymore, that if she did reach across, her hand would encounter only darkness and emptiness or the plush surface of movie-theatre upholstery” (EW, 125).

Marian’s ideas about marriage are also reflected in Duncan, who disapproves of marriage in general. Marian compares Duncan to Peter, and finds Duncan non-threatening, and non-demanding. Marian dreads an encounter between Duncan and Peter because she fears the destruction of the one by the other. Though, who would be destroyed by whom and why, she could not tell (EW, 185).

Marian’s subjectivity is divided between herself as Peter’s fiancé and Duncan’s projected double³ and an encounter between these two “selves” will make one of them disappear. The former represents a socially acceptable idea of femininity, and the latter represents Marian’s repudiation of this role. This division of her subjectivity acts as protection and resistance to the annihilation of the self envisaged by the subject, however unconsciously. The narrative resolution in *The Edible Woman* differs from traditional notions of the double, which often annihilates one, or sometimes both. After Peter has left Marian’s apartment, Duncan pays her a visit, and together they annihilate the cake that resembles the Marian of Peter’s party.

5.1.2 *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Gilead is a totalitarian regime that utilises visual mechanisms for maintaining power. These mechanisms include Eyes, Angels, watch posts, armed Guardians (who prevent subversive acts), and searchlights. Power is

³ As *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle* includes the notion of the divided self and draws largely on the Gothic tradition of dualism and divided selves. In nineteenth century Gothic fiction the double signifies a desire to be re-united with the lost centre of personality. Gothic fiction’s conception for otherness represents the unity of the self and other as impossible. In *Lady Oracle*, instead, there is an acceptance of the various selves, which constitute subjectivity. In *Lady Oracle*, the Self is represented as an unstable entity that doubles and multiplies through the different identities assumed simultaneously by Foster and Delacourt. Her projected personae range from film stars to heroines of fairy tales

maintained by isolating the individual and by restricting their access to knowledge. This restriction also includes the regulation of language, whether in a spoken or written form.

Patriarchal thought usually perceives “women” as a homogenous category, regarding all women as the same. However, the patriarchal regime of Gilead fragments “women” into various categories as Wives (the wives of Commanders), Econowives (the wives of poor men), Marthas (the housekeepers) and Handmaids (the procreators).

Although fertile women such as Handmaids are a scarcity in Gilead, they remain powerless, whereas Marthas, Wives, and Aunts enjoy a greater measure of freedom. The power structure of Gilead divides and conquers women by assigning them to categories of unequal power. For example the troop of Aunts who indoctrinate the Handmaids are the only women who are permitted access to read and write, who have access to weapons, and enjoy a greater freedom of movement than even the Wives do. The status and function of a woman is reflected in the clothes they wear and consequently, clothes becomes symbolic of power.

A particular class is defined by its dressing code, which reflects the identity of the class. Class-specific dressing codes, instilled by the laws of Gilead make previously private identities public, eradicating individuality and turning people into masses. The clothing system functions as a device of control, assisting in the regulation of people.

Men are also classified by their clothes and wear similar dark coloured uniforms. Differences in class are marked by accessories such as crests, guns, briefcases, rather than in clothing whereas differences in women’s functions are exemplified by colour. Aunts wear brown uniforms, Marthas wear dull green dresses, and Wives wear blue dresses. Handmaids are marked by their red dresses and the Econowives by dresses that have red, blue and green stripes. According to McDowell (1992:85), dress is THE social shorthand that proclaims one’s identity and one’s position in society⁴. It

⁴ The rejection of rigid gender roles and the subsequent fragmentation of identity is a major theme in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: a Biography* (1977) in which the protagonist undergoes a biological transformation and changes from man into woman. She also discovers that her identity changes when she wears “gender specific” clothes. In Turkey, wearing unisex trousers, she was not aware of her gender. When wearing breeches, her identity was male.

reveals one's attitudes, values, ideologies and standards. Clothing thus plays a crucial role in the construction of gender identity and power politics.

The brown uniforms of the Aunts are associated with the military. The Econowives wear striped dresses with the three colours symbolic of the functions that they unify: wife (blue), Martha (green) and Handmaid (red). The Marthas cook, clean, and take care of children and therefore wear green, which is the colour of hope, life and nurturing. "Unwomen" are dressed in grey – which suggests dead tissue, and this is exactly what they become once they are sent to the colonies to clean up toxic waste. Grey is also an "in-between" colour, neither black nor white, but a mixture of the two. "Unwomen" are feminist activists, and therefore not enough "women" to be called women since, to be a "true" woman, she must accept herself as the Other (de Beauvoir, 1972:268). Feminist activists are therefore not deemed "true" women in Gilead. This is another example of the binary thinking of Gilead that provides no positive spaces for "inbetween" identities.

The Wives wear blue, a colour often associated with spirituality and things not bound to earth (Biederman, 1994:44). She will be the mother of her Handmaid's baby without giving birth herself, and without being impregnated. Serena Joy can thus be considered as a "virgin-mother", a status reinforced by the fact that blue is also the colour of the Virgin Mary's cloak, who is addressed poetically as the "blue Lily" (Biederman, 1994:44). This association is further reinforced by Serena Joy's perfume called "Lily of the Valley". In Gilead, the "virginal maternal" is an impossible duality of inviolable/fertile body which, according to Kristeva (1987:71) is at the heart of the Christian ideal of womanhood. The woman's body appears as a sealed vessel and her tightly sealed bodily borders renders the body beyond the obscene.

According to Lynda Nead (1992:6), the "forms, conventions, and poses of art have worked metaphorically to shore up the female body – to seal orifices and to prevent marginal matter from transgressing the boundary dividing the inside of the body and the outside, the self and the space of the other". The maternal

When wearing a dress, she is aware of differences in gender. Orlando cross dresses and "...with different clothes comes different personalities or "parts" that she had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining ..." (*Orlando*, 137). It seems that Orlando's crossing the borders of gender gives her the freedom to assume alternative subjectivities, as well as gender roles.

body resists closure; instead, its boundaries are fluid, and therefore dangerous.

Offred's maternal body has been "sealed" by her red bell-shaped cloak, and is therefore rendered as safe. The maternal body could be seen as a thoroughfare, a threshold where "nature" confronts "culture" (Kristeva, 1980). As Kristeva (1987:181) argues, in the image of the Virgin Mother the potential threat of the maternal body is contained within the imaginary construct of the virgin birth, the body inviolate. Such an inaccessible ideal of femininity cannot be achieved except by the sacrifice of sexuality or by, if she is married, one who leads a life that would remove her from the "earthly" condition and dedicate her to the highest sublimation alien to her body. This "ideal" is achieved by the sacrifice of the Wives' sexuality in intercourse and the "adoption" of the Handmaid's child.

Blue as the colour of the Wives' dresses also signifies their status in Gilead. As the Wives of the Commanders (the designers of Gilead), they are "aristocratic". They are married to the ruling class, and have privileges that other classes of women do not have. "True blue" is a Spanish phrase, referring to the notion that the veins of aristocratic families are bluer than that of "inferior" lower classes (Brewer, 1998:1). In the context of Gilead, this means that the Wives are more aristocratic, more "blue" than the Handmaids are. As such, Serena Joy is the "real" wife of the Commander, and not Offred, who wears red⁵.

Blue, in artistic terms, is a cold colour and is opposed to red, which is a warm colour. Red is the colour of the Handmaids' shoes, dress and umbrella. It is a signalling colour, indicating both sexual attraction, but it is also symbolic of danger. Red is closely associated with sacrifice because of the red colour of blood. It is thus significant that the Handmaids wear red since they are expected to sacrifice their bodies and identities for the survival of the human race. Red is also symbolic of sin, forgiveness is symbolised by white. Offred's attire is red, and her headdress (wings) is white. These are based on binary

⁵ The proverb "true blue will never stain" is also applicable to Serena Joy. This proverb means that a noble heart will never disgrace itself. The reference is to the blue aprons and blouses worn by butchers that do not show bloodstains. Serena Joy will not disgrace herself by allowing the Handmaid to have an affair with her husband. She finds out that the Handmaid

oppositions; mind/matter and sin/forgiveness. Her red dress associates the body with sin and matter and the white wings associates the head with reason, purity and spiritual matters. Her "natural" body is cast in the geometrical contained form of the bell-shaped stiff red dress and the white starched wings she has to wear. The clothing functions as a second skin because the Handmaids are not allowed to be seen in public without their attire. The boundaries of the woman's body have thus been redrawn by men and fixed.

Handmaids' identities are also divided according to the virgin/whore dichotomy. They are seen as valued "vessels" that should strive towards purity. However, the Wives and sometimes, the Marthas view them as immoral. This dichotomy is reflected in their dress: their thoughts should be clean – a purity symbolised by their white wings, but their "sinful" bodies are wrapped in their red attire. Their red shoes signify the only option available to them: prostitution.

The Handmaid's body – internally and externally - becomes the site for the coercive exercise of power.

According to Ash and Wilson (1992:8) clothing helps construct identity, either by gluing a "false" identity on the "surface" (one's "real" identity) or by lending a theatrical and play-acting aspect to oneself. In a sense, the classes in Gilead become actors in a play, faking and acting out their identities as Wives, Econowives, Marthas or Handmaids. But in the end these identities become their "true" selves since, as Kristeva maintains, identity is constructed by performance and repetition.

The identity of a particular class is thus reflected in their dressing code, and a change of dress may result in a change of identity. For example, Offred's friend Moira, ambushes Aunt Elizabeth in the bathroom, pretending that the toilet has over flown. She sticks a long thin pointed lever that she broke off the toilet into the Aunt's ribs. Moira takes off her own clothes and dresses herself in those of Aunt Elizabeth. She also grabs the Aunt's cattle prod and her whistle and before fleeing she ties her up and stuffs cloth into Aunt Elizabeth's mouth to prevent her from calling for help. Moira has the Aunt's

before Offred has had an affair with the Commander, after which the Handmaid mysteriously

power now, because, in the Aunt's dress she is "free" to go where ever she pleases.

Power, identity and clothing are thus closely related. The bodily boundary created by clothing is an arbitrary boundary, which is socially constructed. But, although it is an arbitrary boundary, it creates very real physical and mental boundaries, especially for the Handmaids. Their vision is impaired by the white wings they wear. The wings fragment their vision by preventing them from seeing the "big picture" since only isolated parts of their surroundings are visible. Their bodily boundary created by their red outfits limits their physical space since they are only allowed to visit prescribed places such as "All Flesh" (the meat market) and scheduled Ceremonies. The fragmentation of their vision symbolises the fragmentation of their knowledge of the world – and in her secret meetings with the Commander, Offred puts the puzzle of Gilead together, gaining insight and therefore power.

Not only is their vision fragmented, but so is their speech. "Communication" along their daily-prescribed walks consists of preset phrases such as "Praise be" or "Blessed be the fruit". Deprived of free speech, reading, and writing, the Handmaids are defined solely in terms of their bodies' abilities to reproduce.

Although the Handmaids are frequently assigned to new Commanders, they never retain their names⁶, but are always defined in relation to their present Commander. The Commander's identity is central and Handmaid's identity is marginal. As the centre, the Commander's name is Fred, and therefore his Handmaid's is Offred. Similarly, the Commander Warren's Handmaid is called "Ofwarren".

According to Shinn (1996:43), Offred's name reveals her multiple perspectives. She may be "Of Fred", but is also "Off Red", deviating from the role of the Handmaid as symbolised by her red attire. She is also "Off(e)red" – by Gilead as a procreative vessel. Off Red is off-centre, signifies her identity other than being a Handmaid, and the double perspective her previous live

hanged herself.

⁶ Naming has always been a human source of power, as is reflected in the tale *Rumpelstiltskin*. In this tale, the ugly little man can claim the woman's child if she cannot come up with his name. If she cannot name him, she cannot own him. He will then belong to the ugly little man. In the end, when she is able to name the child, she retains ownership of the child, and the little man is powerless. The ugly little men of Gilead claim the children of the Handmaid's by naming the Handmaids and their children (Shinn, 1996:43).

offers her on the Gilead-myth. The women of Gilead are denied the privileges of either oral or written preservation of their story, so the very survival of her "tale" attests to her identity as Off Red, as someone other than a Handmaid. Off Red means that she has escaped her role of the Handmaid as she crossed the borders of Gilead with the help of Mayday.

This is a phallogentric representational system, since a woman's identity is defined and understood only in relation to a man's identity. Being a binary system it is also representative of Cartesian thought. According to Nead (1992:23), the goal of Cartesian thought is the creation of distinct boundaries between one's sense of self and the "Other". In a patriarchal society such as Gilead, men are at the centre and represents the "Self" and women the "Other". Those who deviate from the "Self" such as women, the elderly and gays, are excluded from society or the "Self". One can thus extrapolate what constitutes the "Self" by examining those who are considered "deviant". The Self is male, active, healthy, capable, fertile and powerful. The centre's identity is thus constituted by exclusion; by the frame or criteria of what constitutes "real" identity.

The classification of bodies is thus arbitrary because the "frame" for determining identity depends on the context. In Gilead, Offred has a marginal, powerless identity, but outside the borders of Gilead, she has been in a position of power, maintaining herself and by earning her own money. Offred says of her former name "I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number ... but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up ... I think of this name as buried" (HT, 94). This shows a fragmentation of subjectivity - a split between body and subjectivity, as well as a split in her identity before Gilead was established and after⁷.

⁷ The importance of names is also evident in Oscar Wilde's "The importance of being Ernest" (1899), in which both Miss Gwendolyn Fairfax and Miss Cardew are engaged to a Mr Ernest Worthing, the imaginary brother of Mr Jack Worthing. His friend, Algernon pretends to be Ernest Worthing, and Cecily Cardew falls in love with him, because of the perceived positive attributes that his name contains. However, Gwendolyn Fairfax falls in love with Jack Worthing, because she thinks his name is Ernest Worthing. Both Gwendolyn and Cecily have been deceived, since Ernest does not exist. They both suddenly fell out of love, because they are engaged to nobody, since Ernest does not exist. Thus, for them, their lover's identities have changed with their change of names.

This fragmentation of subjectivity highlights Kristeva's notion of identity as a text, in the continual process of being written. Offred's identity is formed by her context and the change in context brings a change in identity. Her present identity is not an either/or identity – she still had “remnants” of her previous self – memories, and beings. Although Handmaids are expected to conform to a rigid model, Offred's subjectivity is the excess that cannot be contained within a single system. Offred's identity becomes a palimpsest, overwritten with new information without the “old” information completely erased.

The severe language restrictions imposed on the Handmaids (as well as most women and men in Gilead) are reflected in the tightly secured borders of the country. The bodies of the citizens of Gilead, as the country's geographical borders are static and no unauthorized information is allowed to cross.

It is significant that a society so visually orientated, that uses colour as a classification device, that has a crest comprising of an eye with wings and that secures its power by “Eyes” and “Angels”, should ban mirrors. The Handmaids are prohibited from seeing themselves. However, Gilead provides another kind of mirror, which provides an almost perfect reflection of a Handmaid – another Handmaid. Every Handmaid reflects her shopping partner, since they are required to walk in pairs. Their dress, behaviour and language are imitations of the same prescribed template. In this socially constructed “mirror”, the Handmaids do not see who they are or who they would like to be, but who they are supposed to be.

The role of the mirror in constructing the “self” is also evident in Atwood's poem “Marrying the Hangman”. She states that: “To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live without mirrors is to live without the self”. Offred is deprived of a “self” in many ways but attempts to assert an alternative identity by denying her new name: “My name is not Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden” (HT, 108).

Similar to her identity, her voice is diminished to a whisper, which she describes as mutilated, violently fragmented and amputated. The Handmaids' speeches are “clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of our white wings. It's more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech” (HT, 211). The fragmentary voice of Offred reflects the fragmented narrative structure (consisting of her verbal tape recordings).

Offred knows that language shapes reality and that names and words have no truth-value. Words only have a symbolical relationship to “things” and are therefore arbitrary. Her search for multiple meanings for words could be seen as a search for alternative realities. “I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for Flesh. None of these facts has connection with the others. These are the kind of litanies I use, to compose myself” (HT, 120). Also, “My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech” (HT, 76). That she must compose herself implies that she is fragmented. Offred experiences a split between “self” and “body” – an “existing apart from the body” (HT, 169), especially at the nights of the Ceremony. She pretend not to be present, not to be in the flesh.

Offred thus compares herself to the linguistic sign that has a fragmented nature. She realises that as the signifier has no inherent connection to the signified, her body has no inherent connection with her identity. The fragmentation of the linguistic sign implies an absence of meaning – which Offred feels within herself – and for this reason she looks for meaning and identity in unity, because Gilead is a story consisting of fragments, “like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force” (HT, 279). According to Rao (1993:82), the connection between self, text, and body is indicated by the fact that the story itself is described in anthropomorphic terms: “But I keep on with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story ...” (HT, 279). The use of language as a tool to assert power is evident in Offred’s assertion that “He [the Commander] has something we don’t have, he has the word” (HT, 114). In Gilead, the play with language implies a play with people’s realities. The game *Scrabble*, which the Commander plays with Offred, entails a play with words and language, which becomes a means of testing a person’s knowledge - a way of “entering” a person. Offred realizes the sexual dimension of using words, of reading when she says: “While I read, the Commander sits and watches me doing it, without speaking but also without taking his eyes off me. This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel

undressed while he does it ... this illicit reading of mine seems a kind of performance" (HT, 194).⁸

To read and to watch a person reads gain a sexual dimension. By asking questions, Offred is playing up to the Commander, drawing him out, she feels speech backing up inside her since "it's so long since I've really talked with anyone" (HT, 195). Offred adds that her illicit reading seems a kind of performance and watching "is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it" (HT, 194). Previously, Offred has only secretly whispered to Ofglen, which she regards a "tease", a mere preliminary.

After meeting secretly with the Commander, Offred's relationship with him changes. During the night of the Ceremony, Offred feels an awkwardness that had not been there before. Both Offred and the Commander are in a state of absence, of existing apart from their bodies. However, later on, she feels shy before him. The sexual act that should have been "no more than a bee is to a flower" (HT, 170) has become an embarrassing breach of propriety that it has not been before. This new relationship between Offred and the Commander, and her opportunity to read and write, to ask questions and play with words give her a sense of identity, an alternative identity to that of a reproduction machine and a sense of ownership of her body.

5.1.3 *The Blind Assassin*

In *The Blind Assassin*, the fragmentation of body and identity are closely related to the notion of the double. In *The Blind Assassin*, Laura often acts as Iris's double, physically, as well as spiritually.

The plural and fragmented identity of Iris is emphasised by Laura as Iris's double. Laura wears Iris's clothes, uses her perfume and never knocks where Iris is concerned. Iris notices: "Seeing her from behind gave me a peculiar sensation, as if I were watching myself" (BA, 477).

Also, when visiting the family grave yard, Iris recognises herself in one of the two Chase Angels. The first angel stands with her head bowed to the side in an attitude of mourning, one hand is placed tenderly on the shoulder of the

⁸ The sexual nature of reading is also evident in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1981), which suggests explicit analogies between the act of reading and sex, especially when the two readers of Calvino's novel ended up in bed together.

second angel. The second kneels and leans against the other's thigh, cradling a sheaf of lilies. Laura asserts that the angels are meant to be them. They are indeed the two angels, since Iris is the one who mourns for her past, and Laura is associated with spirituality. Laura is said to "write like an angel" (BA, 608), but Iris notes that angels do not write much. They record the sins and names of the damned and the saved, or they appear as disembodied hands and scribble warnings on walls. But both Iris and Laura appear as "disembodied hands" on each other's photograph (of the Button-factory picnic). They are thus the two Chase Angels.

With the onset of riots against capitalism, Iris and Laura are encouraged to remain within the safety of their family house. Two rag dolls in frilly pink dresses have been thrown into the fire, representing Iris and Laura (who were the daughters of a capitalist). Laura hides Alex Thomas, who is believed to have Communist interests, in the attic of her father's house. The police is looking for him because he allegedly burnt down the Button-factory. Iris and Laura take turns to visit him and give him food and water. Tending Alex in the attic brings them closer together and reinforces their status as doubles: "We were Mary and Martha ... I was to be Martha, keeping busy with household chores in the background; she was to be Mary, laying pure devotion at Alex's feet" (BA, 264).

Iris and Laura are also both in love with Alex Thomas and at the time of Iris's pregnancy, Richard impregnated Laura as well, but sent her away to the Bella Vista Sanctuary.

The reader is aware of Iris's fragmented identity in her account of when they were little. Iris observes that unlike Laura, she does not have her own letter: She "had" the L, the one that began her name, and to which a rhyme is attached:

"L is for Lily,
So pure and so white;
It opens by day,
And it closes by night" (BA, 110).

Iris laments the fact that she never had a favourite letter that begins her name – "I is for Iris but it is also everybody's letter" (BA, 110). According to Barthes

(1975), this letter signifies one's identity as plural, rather than single, since the letter "I" has an infinite number of signifieds.

The double has ramifications on notions of authorship and the text – especially regarding the author as individual and autonomous: Iris publishes *The Blind Assassin*, with Laura as the posthumous author.

Iris notices that for Laura's reading audience she is only an appendage: "Laura's odd, extra hand, attached to no body - the hand that passed her on, to the world, to them" (BA, 350). They do not know that it was Iris, and not Laura that wrote the book. To name Laura as the author would thus be false. Iris explains: "But on second thought ... I can't say that Laura didn't write a word. Technically that's accurate, but in another sense – what Laura would have called the spiritual sense – you could say she was my collaborator. The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers" (BA, 626). Iris's writing is a "fist" because she hits back at Richard and Winifred with it. Laura and Iris share a life and therefore are one, because they "write" each other's story. As doubles, they share authorship of the text. Iris puts it this way "Laura was my left hand, and I was hers. We wrote the book together. It's a left-handed book. That's why one of us is always out of sight, whichever way you look at it" (BA, 627).

By removing the author one removes the final signified, which is the explanation of the text. The reality of the narrative is also questioned in Iris's "recording" of events. She states that she wrote what she remembered but also what she imagined. Iris is an eighty three year old narrator, looking back upon her life. According to Williams (1997:173), the passage of time often renders one's accounts of events imperfect. Some details will be exaggerated while others will be left out. Events will be twisted to resemble what the narrator would have liked to expect. Iris's fragmented identity is evident in the fact that she thought of herself as a "bodiless hand, scrawling across a wall" (BA, 626).

Nevertheless, Iris views her narrative as a memorial and a wall. Because she has no alternative to marriage, she asserts "there was nothing behind me but a wall" (BA, 277). After her husband has died, she is able to scrawl across the wall. Writing on the wall signifies an activity that provides her with power as opposed to her passive status as a victim against a wall. Again, her divided

subjectivity is evident in her two notions of her “self”. Her two notions of “self” consist of herself as a young unmarried girl with nothing but a wall against her, and the elderly Iris, “scrawling” on the wall. Iris’s last sentence to Sabrina is “But I leave myself in your hands. What choice do I have? By the time you read the last page, that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be” (BA, 637). This quotation reinforces the affinity between Iris’s identity and the text – they are both in Sabrina’s hands.

Iris recounts her life and the changes in her identity, with the wedding as the decisive break between herself as a young girl and who she is now. Her narrative reconstructs the events of her and Laura’s life, and therefore, it reconstructs her identity. It will also alter the identity of her granddaughter, Sabrina. By reading Iris’s autobiography, Sabrina will no longer be who she thinks she is as she has no relation to Richard or Winifred. Alex Thomas is her real grandfather. Sabrina is free to reinvent herself at will – to clean her hands of the Griffens⁹. The fact that Sabrina is never at home, but tours the world, might indicate that she does not get along with Winifred and might welcome this opportunity to rid herself of the Griffens.

According to Deery (1997:4), the fragmentation of women’s bodies and identities relates to an epistemological and hence ontological subordination. Women’s “edges” are uncertain because their self-definition is uncertain. The women characters in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* still mostly see themselves as men do, as fragments. They therefore often fear self-disintegration, they fear being stretched and losing shape altogether. Deery (1997) points out that since her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, Atwood has made it clear that a woman’s body and identity as fragmented is not an advantage but indicates a lack of power. The experience of fission reflects the demands of women’s positions in society where they are expected to play plural roles, as maidens, wives, and mothers.

The next chapter will investigate the intimate relationship between the fragmented subjectivities of the protagonists, and the undermining of traditional notions of textual unity.

⁹ Laura also cleaned her hands of the Griffens by driving off the bridge, according to Iris, in a Pontius Pilate gesture (BA, 4). Bystanders are convinced that she has committed suicide,

because they saw her white gloved hands on the steering wheel, turning the car off the bridge.

Chapter 6

6. ATWOOD AND POSTMODERNISM: THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE TEXT AND THE SELF

According to Rao (1993:80), Atwood's novels often foreground the relativism involved in the construction of reality and the coherent subject. Her texts, particularly *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* exemplify the undermining of traditional notions of textual unity, which is reflected in her challenging notions of the unified subject. The subject as conceived by liberal humanism - unified and coherent - is replaced by a portrayal of subjectivity as double, multiple, fragmented (Rao, 1993:165). In order to determine to what extent *The Blind Assassin* and *The Handmaid's Tale* challenge textual unity, Roland Barthes theory of the "death of the author" (1968) will be applied to these texts. The theory of the death of the author often underpins Postmodern texts (Hopkins, 2000:82), since it advocates the primacy of the text. As such, the Postmodern text is "writerly", as it makes the reader a co-producer of meaning. Terry Eagleton (1996:138) provides characteristics of the "writerly" text as including the text in flux, the elimination of hierarchal textual levels, and intertextuality.

- **The death of the woman author?**

In his influential essay, "The Death of the Author" (1968) Roland Barthes questions the view of the author as the source of all textual meaning. The following year, Michel Foucault concludes his essay "What is an Author" with the question "What difference does it make who is speaking?" underlining the necessity of moving away from the idea of the Author and his or her life as the ultimate explanation of the text, the source of all meaning and the origin of the text.

Barthes' notion of the "death of the author" entails the possibility of multiple and fluid meanings beyond the unity of binary oppositions such as the signifier and the signified. If the "final signified", the author is negated, alternative meanings can be created. This opening up of unity of the signifier and the signified also creates the possibility for alternative identities beyond stereotypes.

The notion of the “death of the author” can thus be liberating, since it questions the adequacy of the traditional subject to represent the universal. However, Nancy Miller warns against the “Death of the Woman Author” and suggests that this notion may be just another mask “behind which phallocentrism hides its fictions”, since this discourse authorises the “end of woman” without consulting her:

What matters who’s speaking? I would answer it matters, for example to women who have lost and still routinely lose their proper name in marriage, and whose signature – not merely their voice – has not been worth the paper it was written on; women for whom the signature – by virtue of its power in the world of circulation – is not immaterial. Only those who have it can play with not having it (Miller, 1982:71).

Battersby (1989:149) agrees that the “Death of the Author” poses a threat to women writers, and asserts that one cannot let Postmodern attacks on authorship deflect one from the task of incorporating women into historical literary traditions. The “death of the author” does indeed pose a threat to the woman authors in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*, but it simultaneously entails the possibility of multiple textual meanings. Arguments against Barthes theory of the “death of the author” seem to pivot on binary thought which always favours the first term within the hierarchy and thus merely proposes a reversal of the hierarchy, leaving binary thought intact.

Traditional notions favours the term “work” as a closed entity with definite meaning assigned by the author. By contrast, a “text” is open, unstable and “writerly”¹. It is in flux, the reader is a co-producer of meaning and therefore, the text contains no stable signifieds (Eagleton, T., 1996:137-138). Sarup (1993:33) agrees when asserting that such a text is in flux, since signifiers keep transforming into signifieds, and vice versa, and therefore, one can never arrive at a final signified which is not a signifier in itself.

The first characteristic of a “writerly” text is a literary work is no longer treated as a stable entity. Since the relationship between signifiers and signifieds are arbitrary, meaning will be unstable. The reader must now shift from the role of passive consumer to that of active producer. The reader as producer of

¹ Barthes explains the difference between “work” and “text” in “From work to text” in *Image-Music-Text: Roland Barthes* (1977).

meaning entails a plurality of meaning “an inexhaustible tissue or galaxy of signifiers, a seamless weave of codes and fragments of codes, through which the critic may cut his own errant path” (Eagleton, T., 1996:138).

The second characteristic of the “writerly” text is that it has no definite beginning nor ending. It has no sequences that cannot be reversed, no hierarchy of textual levels to dictate meaning to the reader. According to Barthes (1975:36), the “writerly” text encourages “circular memory” on the reader’s part and the impossibility of looking at the text in isolation. Also, all literary texts are woven out of other literary texts and not only “influenced” by other texts. In a more radical sense, one can say that every word, every phrase, is a reworking of other writings which precede or surround the particular work. Intertextuality opposes the notion of “originality”, because a specific piece of writing is perceived as having no clearly defined boundaries as it constantly spills over into the works around it, generating different perspectives that dwindle to vanishing point.

Subsequently, intertextuality opposes the notion of the author as the only textual authority, as it is language that speaks in literature and not the author. It follows that the only place where this seething multiplicity of the text is momentarily focused is the *reader*.

The three characteristics of the writerly text as identified by Terry Eagleton - the text in flux, no hierarchy of textual levels, and intertextuality - resist totalising systems and cause the text to be fragmentary².

If one considers Brian McHale’s notion of the “dominant” of Modernist texts, one soon realises that this “dominant” contribute to the writerly nature of Atwood’s texts. The “dominant” is defined as the focussing component of a work, and it is that which guarantees the integrity of the structure (McHale, 1987:6). The dominant of Modernist fiction is epistemological, since it foregrounds questions of the nature of knowledge and one’s relationship with the world. Atwood’s novels foreground epistemological themes identified by

² The notion of fragmentation is not unique to Postmodernism, which entails a critique of the idea of originality and correspondingly emphasises parody and pastiche. There is a significant difference between notions of fragmentation in Postmodernism and those in Romanticism and Modernism: fragmentation in Postmodernism does not depend on the possibility of an original “unity” which has been lost. The Modernists by contrast, tend to figure fragmentation in terms of the loss of an original wholeness. Postmodern fragmentation entails a dissemination, which involves a sense of scattering of origins, identity, centre and presence.

McHale (1987:9) as the accessibility of knowledge, the different structuring imposed on knowledge by different minds. The devices of multiplication and juxtaposition of perspectives, the focalisation of narrative evidence through a single centre of consciousness, and the transferring of epistemological difficulties of characters to its readers (McHale, 1987:9).

6.1 *The Edible Woman*

The Edible Woman explores the traditional notion of authorship, especially the relationship between authors and their works. At the dinner party to which Trevor invites Marian, Fish speaks about authorship, and highlights the attributes of the author:

... the poet thought of himself as the same kind of natural producer; his poem was something begotten so to speak on him by the Muses, or let's say maybe Apollo, hence the term "inspiration", the instilling of breath as it were into; the poet was pregnant with his work, the poem went through a period of gestation, often a long one, and when it was finally ready to see the light of day the poet was delivered of it often with much painful labour. In this way the very process of artistic creation was itself an imitation of Nature ... (EW, 198).

Fish refers to Barthes's (1986) notion of the Author as nourishing the book, which is to say, he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. Fish points out four attributes of the traditional author: 1) the author as male, and a natural producer, 2) the link between the author and divinity, 3) the author as father of the work, producing the text in painful labour, 4) the work as an imitation of Nature, and therefore, a mirror to reality.

Fish goes on to speak about the modern author, disillusioned with the traditional authorship:

The poet could no longer see himself with any self-congratulation as a surrogate mother-figure, giving birth to his works, delivering as it were another child to society. He had to become something else, and what really is this emphasis on individual expression, notice it's expression, a pressing out, this emphasis on spontaneity, the instantaneous creation ... painters who splatter the paint all over the canvas in practically an orgasm of energy but we have writers thinking the same way about themselves ... (EW, 199).

Fish refers to Barthes's notion of the modern "scriptor" who is born simultaneously with the text and in no way equipped with a being preceding or

exceeding the writing. According to Barthes (1968), modern “scriptor” replaces the concept of the Author. The “scriptor” is no longer regarded as the only authority of meaning. The author is no longer the subject with the book as predicate. He thus makes the distinction between the “readerly” and “writerly” text.

However, *The Edible Woman* seems to predominantly exhibit characteristics of the “readerly” stable text. It has a definite beginning and ending, as well as a linear plot which assists the reader to arrive at meaning. The text does not breach ontological boundaries, since there is a definite distinction between the author, the characters and the reader. However, the stable boundaries between author, character and reader corresponds to Marian’s objectives in asserting a selfhood. She attempts to fix the fluid boundaries of her body and self by drawing sharp distinctions between the “Self” and the “Other” (Peter and his ideas of femininity) in order to arrive at an independent identity. The notion of a stable meaningful text, and stable selfhood is, in Marian’s case, a primary concern.

6.2 *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a “writerly” text

The Handmaid’s Tale contains the three characteristics of the writerly text as described by Terry Eagleton; the text in flux, no hierarchy of textual levels, and intertextuality. Elements of Modernist texts, as identified by Brian McHale, contribute to the “writerly” elements in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. These elements include “unknowability”, the juxtaposition of perspectives, focalisation of all evidence through one centre of consciousness, the transferring of epistemological difficulty of its characters to the reader, impeded form, dislocated chronology, stream of consciousness (McHale, 1987:7).

Although *The Handmaid’s Tale* contains the above Modernist elements, it also contains Realist elements (Reynolds and Noakes, 2002:37)³.

³ Nineteenth-century Realism can be described technically and iconographically. Technically, realism deals with the replication of an optical field. Although the term “Realism” is an exceptionally elastic term, broadly denoting the portrayal of life with fidelity - when a subject is “rendered” in such a way as to give the reader the illusion of actual experience. The reportorial manner of rendering events, whether trivial or extraordinary in a matter-of-fact and seemingly unselective way is often employed in a Realist text (Abrahams, 1981:153). Iconographically, nineteenth-century Realism can be described as the subject matter of every day. Realism disapproved of traditional or fictional subjects on the ground that they were not

The Handmaid's Tale is mimetic in so far it imitates "reality" and the situations in the novel are familiar to the reader. Atwood herself explains: "there is nothing in *The Handmaid's Tale* that hasn't already happened or isn't happening elsewhere" (Atwood quoted in Reynolds & Noakes, 2002:40). The social and political situations in Gilead are thus based on historical and contemporary events⁴, for instance the Biblical practice of surrogate motherhood.

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* contains "Realist" elements, it is not necessarily a Realist text, but it presents a "possible-world"⁵. Rather, it is fragmented, and these fragments imitate parts of reality. "Everything in the story is true except the whole of it" (Wellek and Warren, 1972:213).

In addition, realism requires a linear chronology, a "one line of time" (Atwood quoted in Reynolds & Noakes, 2002:19) and a continuous, linear reading where the reader starts at page one and finishes at the last page. It usually has a coherent textual structure as well.

In contrast, *The Handmaid's Tale* has a fragmented structure, partly because of the narrator's continual analepses and prolepses. The device of analepsis and prolepsis, together with dreams, speculations and the use of the technique of stream of consciousness, render the text unstable.

Analepses and prolepses fracture time, as Offred moves into the past and back again, creating multi-layered time-lines. For example, Offred lies in bed in the room that is assigned to her, reminiscing on past events prior to her life as a Handmaid. The following paragraph describes a previous conversation between Moira (her best friend) and herself, discussing exam papers that are due for the next day. The next paragraph plunges even further into Offred's past, to the time when she was still an infant, witnessing her activist mother

real and visible in the present world. It thus entails a rejection of any kind of idealism (Cuddon, 1991:775).

⁴ Shinn (1996:41) agrees that most elements present in the novel are found in "real life". The seeds from which Gilead grows are planted deeply in the *soiled* world of New England, which already boasts similar Old Testament names in Goshen and Sharon. The Middle and Far East provide examples of veiled women who resemble the Handmaids. The Wall that encloses Gilead alludes to the Great Wall of China.

⁵ Possible worlds depend on a propositional attitude: in order for a world to be possible, it must be believed in by some human agent, and as such, weakens fiction's ontological boundary. When elements of the fictional world and the real world overlap and properties from the "ready-made" world of reality are borrowed by the author, a possible world is created

and friends burn magazines with “pretty women with no clothes on”. Her memory then leaps to the time when she “lost time” when her daughter was taken away by agents of the new Gileadean government. Offred suspects that the reason why she “lost time” is because she might have been drugged to prevent resistance on her part when her child is confiscated. Then suddenly, the reader is sucked out of the past, back to Offred’s present where she lies in bed, trying to convince herself that what she is telling is only a story. She reckons that if she believes it to be a story, she will have control over the ending. When the story has ended, her real life will presume (HT, 47–49).

Similar to Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, most of the narrative is rendered as the protagonist’s “stream of consciousness”, a technique that stresses the subjective over the objective, and as such, opposes the logical positivism upon which a unified text depends. The stream of consciousness resists textual coherence in so much as it is a device for the “direct introduction of the reader into the interior life of the character without any intrusions on the part of the author in order to explain or comment the narrative. It is also the “expression of the most intimate thoughts, those which lie nearest the unconscious, but it is a Realist technique, since the author does not *tell* the story of the character’s mind, he makes it tell itself, he dramatises it (Wellek and Warren, 1970:223).

6.2.1 The limits of knowledge

Offred’s survival under the Gileadean regime hinges upon her ability to gather and interpret information since her survival and possible escape depend on it. This goal is complicated, because, within the confines of Gilead, her knowledge is as restricted as her movement. In Gilead, all forms of communication are illicit and therefore, Offred’s only source of information is gossip and the ability to “read beneath it” (HT, 93). Consequently, Offred is unsure about the difference between truth and falsehood, or government propaganda. For example, televised news traditionally strives to report events objectively. However, the citizens of Gilead believe the news to be inaccurate and simulated. Offred is allowed to watch the news on the evenings of the

(McHale, 1987:34-35). The novel containing such a world thus contains “real” elements, but

Ceremony⁶, with the Marthas, Nick the chauffeur and Serena Joy. Television broadcasting reinforces Offred's ambivalence towards the reliability of knowledge: when Serena Joy switches the television set on, the first channel shows a choir with members having greenish yellow skins. Offred extrapolates that the colour of the television set needs adjusting. The second channel shows waves, coloured "zigzags", and a garble of sound. Offred now extrapolates that the Montreal satellite station is being blocked in a conscious effort of the government regulate and restrict its citizens' knowledge. There is also a channel with a preacher; several blank channels, and then the news. Now that Offred realises information is regulated by the government, she knows that she cannot trust the authenticity of even the news. She remarks "Such as it is, who knows whether any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it" (HT, 92). Of one of the people in the news broadcast she remarks, "Possibly, he's an actor" (HT, 93).

Knowledge is unstable since the boundaries between documentation and fiction are dissolved. Another example is when the Handmaids are shown old pornographic movies once a week. These movies show women to be tied up, chained or with dog collars around their necks. They are raped, beaten up and killed. Aunt Lydia urges the Handmaids to consider these alternatives to the restrictions of Gilead, in an attempt to convince them that they are being protected and have better living conditions under the new regime. But the reality status of these movies is questioned when Moira points out that the scenes in the movies are not real, they are simulated by actors, " .. but it was hard to tell" (HT, 128). What makes it even harder to tell is Offred's memories of the pornographic magazines her mother burnt. The covers of these magazines display naked women hanging from ceilings (amongst other things).

Within the borders of Gilead, the boundaries between "reality" and "fiction" are unstable. The rulers of Gilead achieve realism by making no distinction between different genres.

does not necessarily fall under the Victorian-Realist tradition.

⁶ The Ceremony refers to the Gileadean ritual in which Offred is supposed to be impregnated by the Commander, in the hope of conceiving a child for him and his Wife.

6.2.2 A single centre of consciousness

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, all narrative evidence is focalised through one single consciousness⁷, until the very end of the novel when focalisation takes place through the keynote speaker and the chairperson. Atwood uses the technique of the Narrator equals Character to limited Offred's knowledge since the narrator-character can only know those events in which he or she participates. Since Offred does not really know to what extent her information is true, the reader cannot trust her completely, which renders Offred a fallible narrator.

The nature of knowledge is further destabilised when the reader realises that Offred's narrative has been reconstructed by Professor Darcy Pieixoto and Professor Knotly Wade. Offred's "original" narrative is thus placed under erasure.

The Historical Notes (act as a parody of scholarly symposiums) that follow her narrative and concludes the book does not clarify the obscurities in Offred's narration as the reader hopes it would. The reader realises that the information contained in the notes is not a "meta-perspective" on Offred's narrative, and as such, offers no "truth". It does not contain the objectivity associated with academic work, and as such the Historical Notes are part of the fiction, as the Foreword and the commentaries are part of the fiction of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*.

The subjectivity of Offred's narrative contrasts with the presumed objectivity of the Historical Notes that suggests academic discourse, partly because of its title, and partly by the use of the present participle "being" (Reynolds & Noakes, 2002:51). Consequently, the reader expects clarity pertaining to the questions raised by Offred's narrative - only to realise that there is no "neutral" position from which to speak. The Historical Notes contain several ambiguous and possibly sexist jokes, for instance, Professor Pieixoto asserts that "... we all enjoyed our charming Arctic Char last night at dinner ..." (HT, 312). The "we" to whom Pieixoto refers is the all-male members of the Symposium who

⁷ Focalisation through a single centre of consciousness has been used by Henry James, whose narrator display excessive innocence or over-sophistication to the extent that they are fallible. Franz Kafka in *Metamorphosis* (1972) also uses the technique of focalising all narrative evidence through a single consciousness, namely Gregor Samsa until the very end of the novel when focalisation takes place through the charlady.

visit a restaurant the previous night. To establish whether this statement is indeed sexist is difficult, since Atwood plays on the multiple meanings of words. The word "char" has the double meaning, connoting a woman hired by the hour or day to do house cleaning, or alternatively, it refers to a Hill-trout of Wales. Is Pieixoto referring to a platter of fish or a woman? This statement highlights the unstable nature of reading, since some readers will regard it as sexist, whereas others might not. Pieixoto nevertheless makes a short-lived attempt to objectivity, when he urges his audience not to be too judgemental of the Gileadeans. Anthropologists are famous for their attempts not to judge the society they study. Pieixoto however, fails in this attempt when he sarcastically refers to Offred as the "Goddess of History" (HT, 322).

The Historical Notes that are part of the fiction dissolves hierarchical boundaries between genres of scholarly studies, autobiography and fiction. Before reading the Historical Notes, Offred's narrative seems to be an autobiography. However, Professor Pieixoto highlights the fact that her narrative has been reconstructed

Fragmentation characterises Offred's "original" tape-recorded narrative, which has been discovered an after its recording by the scholars Professor Knotly Wade and Professor Pieixoto. Approximately thirty tapes have been found in the foot-locker in disarray and Wade and Pieixoto have transcribed the tapes and ordered them in what they thought is their logical sequence. Pieixoto admits that their reconstruction of Offred's voice-recorded narrative is unstable, since the arrangement of the tapes "has been based on guesswork and is to be regarded as approximate, pending further research" (HT, 314). However, any rearrangement of the tapes is bound to alter the structure of Offred's narrative, and therefore it's meaning⁸. *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a good example of how the voice of a woman has been silenced by male writing.

⁸ Offred's narrative, her voice recordings, is also a reconstruction of her "original" experience. It is thus important to note that the notions of originality and immediacy are questioned, together with that of authorship. Wade and Pieixoto are searching for the origins of the text (by attempting to trace the narrator directly, and visiting the site where the tapes were discovered), but the origins of the text - the original - disappears the moment Offred's reconstructed it.

The meaning and structure of *The Handmaid's Tale* are thus arbitrary and unstable, hence the irony of the title of Wade's lecture: "Problems of Authentification in Reference to The Handmaid's Tale".

The reader is thus left with the question: "who is the author of *The Handmaid's Tale*?" Is it Offred, or are Pieixoto and Wade the authors? Foucault (1997) is of the view that it does not really matter who is speaking, since writing is the destruction of every voice and every point of origin. However, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a case point of the importance of the author, and that it does matter who is speaking, since it is obvious that those who speak also have power. Offred's narrative, as her body and identity, has disappeared into silence, as many women authors before her have. However, the authors of *The Handmaid's Tale* enter their own deaths when the reader realises that their text is constituted by what is absent (Offred's "original" voice recorded narrative), so in a sense, their meaning is absent too. For Derrida (1978), the structure of the sign is determined by the trace of that which is forever absent. The sign therefore cannot be taken as a homogeneous unit bridging an origin (referent) and an end (meaning) (Sarup, 1993:33-34). The sign, as Wade and Pieixoto's text, must be studied "under erasure". The reader must realise that Wade and Pieixoto's text is "inaccurate", but nevertheless important in order to read Offred's narrative, because, without their reconstruction, her voice would still have been silent.

The juxtaposition of the two texts – Offred's narrative, and the Historical Notes – is similar to the narrative structure of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, which also juxtaposes two texts that alter each other's meanings. This makes *Pale Fire* and *The Handmaid's Tale* unstable and fluid texts⁹.

The Handmaid's Tale contains several subtexts that render the narrative multi-layered. These subtexts open the text up and renders the it "writerly", since it is the readers who intersect these layers in order to form meanings. For example, the words that the Commander and Offred spell in their game of Scrabble are *Larynx*, *Valance*, *Quince*, *Zygote*, *Limp* and *Gorge* (HT, 149). In the context of their illicit meetings and the breaching of the prohibition on

⁹ The poem "Pale Fire", written by Shade within the novel *Pale Fire*, written by Nabokov is similar to *The Handmaid's Tale*, written by Pieixoto and Wade, within the novel *The*

women's reading and writing, these words acquire sexual connotations. "Larynx" is a cavity in the throat that holds the vocal cords. "Valance" is a short curtain that frames a bed. A quince is a fruit and alludes to the Biblical notion of forbidden fruit. A zygote is equally sexual: it is a spore formed by conjugation of two gametes. "Limp" is the antonym of "stiff". The word "gorge" has several meanings, including that of an opening or a throat. It can also mean to feed greedily, to glut, to swallow, which is exactly what Offred does with the words on the page.

6.2.3 Transferring epistemological difficulty of the character onto the reader

The narrative material is focalised through Offred's point of view, and subsequently, the reader's knowledge is limited to know what she knows. Since her narrative occurs in a totalitarian state, she is cautious in her revelations. Offred's epistemological problems are transferred to the reader,¹⁰ partly through the introduction of neologisms. Neologisms coined by the rulers of Gilead include words such as "Salvaging" and "Particicution" which somewhat "embellishes" or "softens" the word's meaning. "Salvaging" does not refer to "saving" or "rescuing". Rather, it refers to the practice of executing those who indulged in forbidden practices by leading them up a stage, white bags are placed over their heads, and they are helped up onto high stools. The noose of a rope is fastened around their necks, after which the stool is kicked away. The bodies are left hanging on the wall (HT, 288-289). According to Brians (1986:7), the term "Particicution" seems to be a scholarly term formed out of "participant execution". In such an event, the guilty person is brought into an arena, after which an Aunt blows a whistle and, the Handmaids have the freedom to kill the person in any way they see fit. After a while, the whistle is blown again, and the remains of the person are taken away. The term "prayvaganza" seems to be an amalgamation of "prayer" and

Handmaid's Tale, written by Atwood. These texts within the text questions and foregrounds the notion of authorship.

¹⁰ The device of transferring epistemological difficulty from the character to the reader is typical of Modernism and exemplified in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1983) in which Marlow's difficulty of arriving at meaning or the truth is delayed and transferred onto the reader, who struggles through textual obscurity. The device of epistemological difficulty simulates for the reader the same problems of accessibility or reliability of knowledge that plagues the character.

“extravaganza”, which have the function of exposing the artificial nature of religion in Gilead. These neologisms are examples of how words construct and distort reality. The novel resists final interpretation and its ending raises many questions to which no fixed answers are provided.

The Historical Notes which conclude *The Handmaid's Tale* significantly end with the question: “Are there any questions?” (HT, 324). This open ending contributes to the “writerly” status of the text, and places a bigger responsibility upon the reader, to produce possible meanings. Offred’s tale is incomplete, as she herself points out at the end of her narrative: “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing ... And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (HT, 307). Offred refers to the black van that has come to take her away, and she is not sure of whether she is being rescued by Mayday (an underground organisation that frees women), or whether she is going to be executed. The novel’s open ending resists closure and fragments the unity of textual meaning¹¹.

At the end of the novel, the reader does not arrive at conclusive answers to questions pertaining to the identity of the narrator, the identity of the Commander, how the tyranny of Gilead has ended and whether Offred has managed to escape or not. Offred’s tale is discontinuous and fragmented in its very materiality and lacks a conclusive ending (Rao, 1993:82). Its fragmented nature and the questioning of the notion of authorship problematises the mimetic function.

6.3 *The Blind Assassin* as a “writerly” text

According to Reynolds and Noakes (2002:136), one could describe the narrative method Atwood employs in *The Blind Assassin* as collage, a word of French origin that literally means “sticking” or “pasting things on” and denotes a literary work that contains a mixture of allusions, references and quotations. In figurative arts, a collage consists of fractured planes as opposed to continuous volumes. It rejects traditional concepts of ordered and unified pictorial spaces that mirror the world. In its place are new representations of

¹¹ In this respect, *The Handmaid's Tale* has affinities with *Heart of Darkness* (1983), which also omits “truth”. Both narratives are fragmented by prolepsis and analepsis, which also layer

the world as dynamic interplays of time and space. Cubism often draws on the artist's memory, as opposed to a referent in "reality", and entails a multiplicity of viewpoints and discontinuity. Cubism is a Modernist statement, emphasising the flat plane of the canvas, and as such it draws attention to the surface itself.

According to Erica Wagner (2000:147), *The Blind Assassin* shares Cubist concerns since it suggests that fiction may be just that – fiction, and it might have no relation to "reality".

6.3.1 Cubist concerns: a collage

The Blind Assassin (2000) contains two separate texts: the frame story, which is Iris's narrative, and the pulp science-fiction novel-within-the novel, *The Blind Assassin* (1947), posthumously published in the name of Laura Chase. These two texts fragment the coherency of the "picture plane" (the textual body) and by acting on each other, they alter each other's meaning and by so doing, resisting final closure. According to McHale (1987:190) the Postmodern split text include the formats of the scholarly gloss or the newspaper page. The newspaper page arranges two or more texts in parallel. Atwood's "split text" is disseminated through the novel: two main narratives are alternated throughout the novel, and are abruptly cut off, after which the other narrative begins. McHale (1987:191) adds that questions about the relationship between the two texts always exist, since the split or fragmented text foregrounds the order of reading. The reader must handle the gatherings or fragments, shuffle them, and put them together to arrive at textual meaning.

The layered narrative creates non-linearity vis-à-vis the linearity of many Realist texts. Textual non-linearity entails that the reader moves back and forth between the narrative layers in order to achieve clarity. The readers may choose to read the scattered pieces of the science fiction novel that take place on the planet Zycron all together in order to obtain a unified, continuous text. Alternatively, one may read the fragmented first-person narrative as a unified text. The newspaper clippings included in the novel may also be read

or fragment time. Both ends with questions: Marlow does not learn the truth about Kurtz, and the reader does not learn the truth about Offred's identity and the success of her escape.

chronologically. Or the readers may read the novel as it is presented, as a collage made up of various texts.¹²

If one reads the science-fiction novel *The Blind Assassin* (1947) in isolation, one could simply interpret it as a pulp science-fiction story. However, another layer of meaning is added to this text if read in conjunction with the frame story. Only then does the reader realise that Iris and Alex explain their relationship in the science-fiction story *The Blind Assassin* (1947). Iris explains her own life not only in her narrative, but also with the help of newspaper clippings, letters, all contained in the steamer trunk. The material in the steamer trunk is the same as the narrative material that the reader finds in the book, perhaps even in the same order. It includes clippings from several newspapers, such as *The Port Ticonderoga Herald and Banner* (BA, 133-4), *The Mail and Empire* (BA, 141-1), *The Toronto High Noon Gossip* (BA, 332), postcards, and a letter from The Bella Vista Sanctuary addressed to Richard.

6.3.2 The Dynamic interplay of time and space

The various narratives included in the frame story provide the reader with multiple viewpoints, fragmenting the “picture plane”. For example, the newspaper article in *The Port Ticonderoga Herald and Banner* declares Iris’s death and mentions that Sabrina has just returned from abroad and will see to her grandmother’s estate. It is after reading this newspaper clipping that the reader reaches the final page in Iris’s narrative in which she daydreams about Sabrina’s possible return. These two texts (the newspaper article and Iris’s memoir) provide a double perspective: the article explains that Sabrina has indeed returned from her journey, and the latter describes Iris’s anticipation of Sabrina’s return.

The reader is thus presented with various perspectives of a single event. Another example of multiple viewpoints is the various angles from which the Button-factory picnic is described. For example, Iris keeps the photograph that

¹² As Roland Barthes points out in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975:10-11), reading does not have to be linear and the readers are free to enter and leave the text wherever they want. This “cutting” is called “tmesis”, and is the source of the pleasure of the text. More responsibility is thus placed on the readers, making them active agents in the process of creating meaning.

the newspaper editor, Elwood Murray took of the Button-factory picnic in a brown envelope. She describes the black and white photograph, which depicts Alex Thomas and herself under an apple tree. Iris wears a white blouse with a white skirt, and Alex a light-coloured hat that angles down on his head.

Ambiguity is created when a different picnic is described, which is also attended by Alex and Iris, who by now, is married to Richard. It is during this picnic that Alex starts to outline the beginnings of the science-fiction story *The Blind Assassin*. As the previous picnic, they also sit under an apple tree and again, he wears a pale blue shirt (BA, 12), whereas Iris wears her white skirt again. These repeated elements (the apple tree, the white skirt, and Alex' blue shirt) gives the impression that it is the Button-factory picnic that is being described and this creates ambiguity.

The reader then encounters another perspective on the first picnic, the Button-factory picnic, in which Iris, Laura, and Alex participate (BA, 217), but in this description, Iris is reminiscing the past (as opposed to describing the photograph). The narrator provides the reader with more information about the actual picnic, and the reader is able to fill in the gaps that exist in existing knowledge about the picnic. For instance, a description of exactly how Iris encounters Laura on the grass with Alex, and how Elwood Murray takes their photograph. Iris's description of the event elaborates on Reenie (the house-keeper) who is upset with Iris and Laura, because it is inappropriate for two young ladies to be alone with a strange man. In this picnic, Alex wears his blue shirt, again. The blue shirt serves as a linking device between the various picnics.

A third perspective on the Button-factory picnic is provided by Iris in her description of the photograph taken by Elwood Murray for the local newspaper *Herald and Banner*. This time, the reader acquires more knowledge about the photograph itself as opposed to the actual event. The reader now knows that Laura was sitting to the left of Alex, and Iris to his right. The reader also knows that both of them are smiling at him. He is smiling too, but he is thrusting his hand up in front of him. Reenie's view that the photograph verges on the immodest (on seeing the photograph for the first time in the newspaper) is also provided (BA, 234).

Because this photograph of the Button-factory picnic is the only existing photograph of Alex Thomas, the police uses it as a wanted poster for Alex when he is a suspect in the burning down of the Button-factory owned by Iris's father (BA, 263). The sides of the photograph have been cut off in order to eliminate Iris and Laura's images (since they are not wanted by the police). The Button-factory photograph is mentioned for a fifth time, when again Iris reminisces on the moment Laura presents her with the photograph: Laura has been an apprentice in Elwood Murray's studio, and has made two copies from the original negatives. One of the two new photographs she gives to Iris, the other one she has kept for her own use. In Iris's copy Laura has cut her own image off "because that's what you (Iris) want to remember" (BA, 269). At this stage, Lara who is in love with Alex, know that Iris is too.

The photograph of the picnic is mentioned again in a description of Laura's copy, which Iris discovers amongst Laura's notebooks after Laura's death. This time, it is Iris's image that has been cut off, and both Alex and Laura are tinted a light yellow, whereas Iris's hand, the only part of her body still visible in the picture, is blue (BA, 610).

Yet another description of the photograph can be found in "The Blind Assassin Epilogue: The other hand" (BA, 631). She explains that a third of the photograph has been cut off – Laura's third. In the lower left corner, Laura's hand is still visible; cut off at the wrist and resting on the grass. According to the narrator, it "is the hand of the other one, the one who is always in the picture, whether seen or not. The hand that will set things down" (BA, 631).

These perspectives on the same event contribute to the fragmentation of the text and discontinuous reading. In the seven descriptions of the Button-factory picnic, photographs of the picnic, and copies of the original photograph, Atwood seems to provide a parody of the Postmodern foregrounding of the notion of mimesis¹³.

6.3.3 Reality versus fiction

¹³ A good example of a parody of mimesis is provided in Ackroyd's *English Music*. Chapter six provides a parody of detective novels such as Sherlock Holmes, and foregrounds the "cleverness" of the detective who finds clues against all odds. As Iris, Timothy lives only in the narrative, for instance, the reality of his father who has disappeared is turned into fiction with the title "The Case of the Disappearing Father" (EM, 121).

Different from *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Blind Assassin* draws clear distinctions between reality and fiction; between Iris's narrative and the story of the planet Zycron. The narratee at times, finds the story ludicrous and mocks the narrator. When she hears that the planet Zycron has seven seas, five moons, and three suns of varying strengths and colours, she asks whether it comes in chocolate, vanilla and strawberry flavour (BA, 19). The narratee is therefore aware of her existence in "reality" as opposed to science-fiction. The epistemological is thus still the dominant mode because the characters understand and know the difference between the world of fiction and that of reality.

The characters in Iris's narrative; Alex, Laura, Richard and Winifred, have higher ontological beings than the characters in the science-fiction narrative, such as the Lizard Men and the Peach Women of Aa'A. Nevertheless, the science-fiction narrative acquires a level of reality, since the narrator of the science fiction novel "builds into it his own social satire, which is a commentary on the hierarchical arrangements and power politics of his time" (Reynolds & Noakes, 2002:21). The science-fiction narrative about the planet Zycron seems to be a reflection of Iris's reality and the political situation in World War II that forms the background of Iris's narrative. There are several parallels between Iris's narrative and the science-fiction novel that compels the reader to assume that they mirror each other. For example, Iris is a prisoner of the domestic realm in marriage, and has been "offered" to Richard by her father. Similarly, the mute girl is a prisoner in the castle, to be sacrificed to the Goddess of the Five Moons. The ideal sacrifice should be like a dance: stately and lyrical. Because the girls protest against being killed, their tongues are cut out. "Thus tongueless and swollen with words she could never again pronounce, each girl would be led in procession to the sound of solemn music, wrapped veils and garlanded with flowers up to the winding steps ..." (BA, 37). The association between Iris and the mute girl is emphasised when the narrator sadistically adds "Nowadays you might say she looked like a pampered society bride" (BA, 37). The sacrificial girl is rescued by the blind assassin, and similarly, Iris is rescued from her silence in marriage by Alex.

Sakiel-Norn seems to be a reflection of the political situation in the novel: the wealth of Sakiel-Norn is based on slaves, but it is bad luck to mention it. Similarly, the wealth of a capitalist country depends on its workers. The social structure of Sakiel-Norn is based upon an upper-class (Snilfards) and a workers-class (Ygniroids). If a Snilfard becomes bankrupt, he is demoted to an Ygniroid, or he may avoid this fate by selling one of his children in order to redeem his debt. This is exactly what Iris's Snilfard father does: he "sells" Iris to Richard in order to redeem his debt.

The danger in accepting the science-fiction narrative as a reflection of reality arises in the fact that one can then also believe that Atwood's novel is a reflection of reality. By believing this, one confirms the "natural" pairing of binary oppositions such as the signifier and the signified - reality and its imitation.

By recording her memoirs, Iris "paints" a self-portrait. Her narrative act renders her subject as well as object, as she is both the author of her text, and a "character" of it. Her reality is fictionalised by her reconstruction of it in the form of the memoir. She makes available to Sabrina a particular representation of herself which is not an unmediated expression of the writer's inner being, but the production of a fictive self which functions as a form of self re-presentation (Pollock, (1996). This is the *raison d'être* of her narrative – to re-present herself into somebody Sabrina might like, because the picture Sabrina has of her is an unfavourable representation, painted by Winifred.

Representation is also questioned by the collapse of boundaries between fiction and reality. *The Blind Assassin* is a Russian Doll narrative¹⁴, written by the author Margaret Atwood, but contains another novel *The Blind Assassin* (1947) with Laura Chase as the author. The author of this novel literally dies after driving a car off a bridge. But on another level, authorship of this novel is

¹⁴ The technique of the Russian Doll worlds is also used by Peter Ackroyd in his *English Music* (1992). Ackroyd is the author of *English Music*, with Timothy and his father as characters, but also with A. Smallwood. However, A. Smallwood is a character, created by an unknown author. But A. Smallwood writes "The Case of the Disappearing Father", with Timothy who is supposed to be "real", as a character. Moreover, Timothy thinks that A. Smallwood is Sherlock Holmes, the character created by Arthur Conan Doyle. Similarly, Felipe Alfau is the author of *Locos* (1988), in which the character, Felipe Alfau writes "Locos" and searches for characters for his novel. There are four levels of reality: Alfau that writes about the character Alfau, the character that writes about characters, such as Gaston

unstable, since it has been collaborately invented by Alex and Iris. The “original” narrative is a verbal narration by Alex, and does not exist anymore. Authorship is ambiguous because the reader is not sure who the real author is. The “original” narrative as relayed by Alex is verbal, and thus does not exist anymore. The novel thus raises the question the notion of authorship: is the author the person who “invents” the story (Alex), or is it the person in whose name it has been published (Laura), or is it the person who writes it down (Iris)?

The contextual frame of the novel, the nineteen-thirties and World War II, creates another levelling of fiction and reality. Concerns such as the problem of immigrants into Canada, economic concerns, unemployment and the rise of Communism, are amalgamated with fictional events and characters. Similarly, historical figures, such as Mr. Franklin Roosevelt are inserted into the newspaper article that reports on a speech given by Richard Griffen (BA, 140-141). Richard’s speech warns citizens of Canada against the “soft socialism” of Mr. Roosevelt, and reports that thousands of immigrants have been deported.

The historical context of the novel (World War II) becomes a text that is read by Atwood, and becomes part of the “projected space of the fictional universe” (McHale, 1987:56).

6.3.4 Objectivity versus subjectivity

Iris’s narrative is in the first person and employs an intimate tone which contrasts with the objectivity of newspaper articles. This is exemplified, for instance, in the detached newspaper report about Laura’s accident: “It was the police view that a tire caught in the exposed streetcar track ...” (BA, 6). The same accident is narrated by Iris in a more subjective and speculative manner: “It wasn’t the brakes, I thought. She had her reasons. Not that they were ever the same as anybody else’s reasons. She was completely ruthless in that way” (BA, 3). The speculative nature of Iris’s narrative is heightened by phrases such as “it might have been” or “it appears”, “it seems” or “as if”. Her perceptions do not belong to the Realist tradition, that requires objectivity, but

Bejerano, and Gaston Bejerano that writes a chapter, containing fourth-order reality

seem more characteristic of Impressionism, which stresses the subjective perceptions of the observer¹⁵.

The difference in tones between the newspaper article and Iris's narrative can be attributed to their respective target audiences. The newspaper articles are intended for the general public, whereas Iris writes for her grand-daughter Sabrina.

Initially, Iris attempts to write for nobody in particular in order to arrive at the "truth". However, every text is built upon a potential audience and includes an image of whom it is written for. Every work encodes within itself an "implied reader" (Eagleton, T., 1996:84). Iris asserts that the moment one writes for an audience, "truth" is compromised: "The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it" (BA, 345). She concludes that this is impossible. Iris is indeed "excusing" herself by clearing her name, and as such, her narrative is presented as the truth.

Iris daydreams that she and Winifred, are the fairy godmothers who gather around Aimee's bed, bestowing gifts. Iris sees herself as the uninvited fairy and when Winifred asks what gift she has to offer, Iris replies that she offers the truth.

Iris also remarks that human beings write in order to memorise themselves, "to assert one's existence, like dogs peeing on fire hydrants" a "... simple claim to existence, like scribbling your initials on a washroom wall" (BA, 603). Iris asserts that the narrative she leaves for Sabrina to read holds the promise of confession without penance (BA, 603), and suggests that she wants

characters.

¹⁵ The term "impressionism" derives from Claude Monet's painting *Impression: Soleil Levant*. The Impressionists were a school of painters who were particularly concerned with the transitory effects of light, and they wished to depict the fleeting impression from a subjective point of view. They were not interested in a "precise" representation or "realism". Nevertheless, one could make the argument that they were also Realists, in another manner. The Realist position in art and literature has been strengthened by the scientific and technological advancements of the nineteenth-century. Similarly, Impressionist theories are based upon scientific studies of light (De La Croix et al., 1991:896).

Sabrina to be her witness, her ideal reader¹⁶. Iris realises that her writing for an ideal reader jeopardises the truth of her narrative, and therefore, she attempts to be objective by writing to “nobody in particular” (BA, 345), not even herself. The closer Iris comes to the end of her narrative (and also her life) the more frequent she addresses Sabrina directly. As long as she produces narrative discourse, Iris lives. When she dies, her discourse ends. Life has been equated with discourse, and death with the end of discourse. The death of the author quite clearly marks the limits of representation (McHale, 1987:228-229). Iris knows that she will die when she reaches the end of her narrative, that is why she arranges to lock her narrative away in the steamer trunk¹⁷, where it will remain until Sabrina comes back from her travels and the lawyer presents Sabrina with the key.

The fact that the reader has access to Iris’s narrative suggests that Sabrina has returned from overseas (Iris is not sure whether she would return), and has unlocked the steamer trunk that contains the fragmented narrative.

Although it has been established that Iris writes for Sabrina, the ontological boundary between reader and character threatens to dissolve when Iris uses the second person pronoun “you” to refer to her narratee. According to McHale (1987:223), “you” is a fluid construct, since it is an empty linguistic sign whose reference changes with every change of speaker in a discourse. In addition, “you” can be singular/plural, or male/female. As the reader of the novel, I am reading her narratives, her letters, and her newspaper clippings. Does this make me Sabrina? If so, the narrative dissolves the boundaries between fiction and reality by fictionalising the reader and making him or her a character in the book.

Alternatively, the “you” is the nobody that Iris writes to in order to retain the truth of her narrative. In this case the reader remains the conventional reader of Margaret Atwood’s novel and ontological boundaries between character and reader are not breeched. Although the “you” seems to refer to Sabrina, it

¹⁶ According to Cuddon (1991:439), every author wants an ideal reader. This reader is the imaginary person who, the writer hopes, will understand completely the author’s experience and intention.

¹⁷ The steamer trunk contains items that mark the most important changes of Iris’s identity: before she got married it held her trousseau, later when she divorced Richard, it contained her and Aimee’s clothes. In her old age, it contains her narrative.

nevertheless retains a connotation of direct appeal to the reader. McHale (1987:224) states that the second person functions as an invitation to the reader to project him or herself into the gap opened in the discourse by the present of "you"¹⁸.

Barthes's essay, "The Death of the Author" (1968) provides possibilities for producing alternative textual meaning. The notion of the death of the author entails that the text is not a closed entity with its meaning determined entirely by the author, but that the text is open, and the reader is the co-producer of textual meaning. The writerly text is in flux, it has no textual hierarchies, which cannot be reversed, and it is intertextual. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* exhibit the characteristics of the "writerly" text, and as such ought to suggest alternative textual meaning and identity. However, in both texts the "death of the author" is also ambiguous. In both texts, the author is a woman who hopes that their texts will be read, by someone who understands their actions. Offred hopes to be rescued, and Iris hopes for Sabrina's forgiveness, which would mean revenge on Winifred who turned Sabrina against her. Both authors die before their texts could be read. But it is writing that is important, and the death of the author entails the beginning of writing and for Iris, this would mean a re-invention of herself.

¹⁸ *The Handmaid's Tale* also raises the question of the "implied reader". Offred asserts if it is a story she is telling, she must have someone to tell it to, because "you don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else ... even when there's no one" (HT, 49). She will call the "somebody" "dear you", because attaching a name to the "you" can be hazardous if she is caught. Offred also remarks that "you" can refer to thousands of listeners.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to bridge a gap in current scholarship on Margaret Atwood's works by using a Postmodern approach which highlights her preoccupation with challenging traditional notions of the unified subject and text.

The fragmented nature of the protagonists' identities, caused – among other things - by traditional gender stereotyping are mirrored in the textual fragmentation of *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*.

In order to establish how Atwood deconstructs gender stereotypes, it was necessary to analyse, first of all, the stereotypes themselves that often women have to adhere to in order to be accepted in patriarchal society.

Patriarchal thought is based upon binary thought, which reduces women to the "Other" to the degree that it is impossible for the "Other" to become a subject (de Beauvoir, 1972:96). It is for this "Other" that the myth of femininity is constructed and so are, among others, the stereotypes of the wife, the mother and the virgin which are particularly relevant to an analysis of *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* in which the protagonists' attempt to conform to these stereotypes causes a fragmentation of their subjectivities.

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian realises that becoming a wife is the only space available to her. In fact, as a woman in the sixties in Canada, she has hardly any opportunities for professional advancement or personal fulfilment beyond marriage. She is aware of the lack of alternative roles for women when she looks at her women colleagues at work, each of them representing different "stages" in the life of women from youth to maturity. The pressure that her fiancé exerts on her by projecting hegemonic ideals of femininity onto her provokes a fragmentation of her personality and she ends up seeing herself as food that Peter will swallow and assimilate. When she meets the care-free, atypical, and "ungendered" Duncan, she comes to see him as her double, as an alternative, possible role.

The implicit societal rules that reduce women to stereotypical feminine roles in *The Edible Woman*, are blatantly enforced by the State's law in the dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Gileadean society, in fact, foregrounds the roles of the wife, the mother and the virgin which confines women to the domestic sphere. As a Handmaid, Offred's identity is reduced to that of mother and she is regarded as a mere host uterus for the Commander and his wife.

Her role as uterus host is reflected in her clothing, the red attire and the red shoes that she has to wear. Her body is fragmented into isolated parts by her clothing, because only her hands and a part of her face are visible. The invisibility of her body reflects her invisibility and silence in the patriarchal society of Gilead. Her marginal position in society is also reflected in the new name she has been given, "Offred", meaning "of Fred", a possession of the Commander. Her identity is thus something she has to piece together from the fragments Gilead has created.

The Blind Assassin explores the stereotypical notions of the wife, the mother and the virgin and exposes these stereotypes as social constructions. Women who conform to these constructions, do so because they lack alternative options and this is particularly true for the women of the older generations. For example, Iris has to marry the wealthy Richard in order to save her family from financial ruin. Iris feels uncomfortable in her role of wife, but she soon realises that her survival depends on the degree to which she can perfect the role.

The Blind Assassin highlights that Iris's situation is not unique and how all the women of her generation and those of the older ones, like her mother, her grandmother and Reenie her housekeeper, have to marry to get economic security. For them, in fact, conforming to traditional roles is the only sensible thing to do.

Atwood seems to suggest that both male and female stereotypes are only constructions and, as such, they can be escaped, especially by the younger generations. Her constant preoccupation with challenging traditional notions of selfhood is reflected in her parallel preoccupation with undermining the coherence of the text itself.

The undermining of notions of "selfhood" and "text" is deeply influenced by Roland Barthes's theory of the death of the author. The author is no longer a

stable entity and the producer of final textual meaning because textual meaning resides in the reader. The authority of the author is thus transferred to the reader, which renders the text unstable. This theory is instrumental in eradicating the authority of the traditional (male) subject, and as such, can have liberating effects on historically marginal positions.

However, in Atwood's novels, *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*, the notion of the death of the (woman) author is often portrayed as negative and disempowering.

For example, in *The Edible Woman*, Marian realises that she has to cease being a reader of Peter's construction and start being the author of her "Self". This entails a strengthening of boundaries between her "Self" and the "Other", in order to prevent the "Other" – the hegemonic ideas of femininity – to seep through. Marian's unitary identity is reflected in the coherent and linear text.

The Handmaid's Tale also foregrounds the affinities between selfhood and the text. Offred's former identity has been eradicated, and her only function in Gilead is that of host uterus. She consequently experiences a fragmentation of identity, which is extended to her narrative in two ways: her recorded voice is fragmented into thirty tapes, which are found in no order by Wade and Pieixoto, two male scholars, many years after the end of the Gilead regime. Offred's narrative is also fragmented because of her uncertainty regarding the nature of truth in a society in which virtually no external information is available. She attempts to attain a coherent identity in order to survive in Gilead, but, nonetheless, her narrative is described in anthropomorphic terms as "mutilated, and limping" (HT, 279).

Similarly, Iris's fragmented identity is reflected in her fragmented narrative consisting of newspaper clippings, photographs, letters as well as her hand-written memoir. Her narrative, locked away in the steamer trunk, is destined to her granddaughter Sabrina who will be given the key at Iris's death. It is only the reader, Atwood seems to suggest, who can 'unlock' the text.

Iris explains how she "collects enough fragments of the past to make a reconstruction of it, which must have borne as much relation to the real thing as a mosaic portrait would to the original" (BA, 83), but Iris is not interested in the "real thing". The elimination of the author entails that her narrative will not be realistic, since final meaning and truth is withheld. Iris, the author, "dies" by

projecting herself onto her writing, and her previous self, as known by Sabrina before reading the narrative, is lost forever the moment she reads it. Iris dies of a heart complication, and when she dies, discourse stops. But 'writing' will begin when Sabrina – and the other readers - start reading Iris's memoirs, the book itself.

7.1 Avenues for further research

It would be meaningful as an avenue for further research to investigate Atwood's deconstruction of traditional male identities in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin* as most of the men characters also recognise the restrictions of traditional gender stereotypes and attempt to escape them. Atwood does not simply propose alternative roles for her women characters, but she criticises the restrictions on her men characters' subjectivities as well.

Each new reading of Atwood's works, will generate new interpretations and, hopefully, will help readers to re-think traditional gender roles.

Chapter 8

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