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A ‘REVIVING’ RETROSPECTIVE OF THE PAST LIFE:  
MARGARET ATWOOD’S NOVEL *CAT’S EYE*

**Abstract**

Margaret Atwood often combines various literary discourses in her fiction. She involves the same technique in the novel *Cat’s Eye*. In this work, she interweaves elements of prose and autobiography, science and painting, all in order to present the female protagonist of the novel. In a certain way, this novel can be interpreted as a writer’s personal retrospective of her previous fiction as in *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Atwood’s analysis is mostly dedicated to the female character of the artist Elaine Risley, the protagonist of the novel. The retrospective of her art is also defined as the introspection of her personality. Therefore, this novel is said to be the most developed version of the fictitious autobiographical text which Atwood created about the life of a woman.

**Keywords**

Autobiography, retrospective, introspection, female, artist.

Margaret Atwood often combines different discourses. Thus, her style has not varied from this technique in the novel *Cat’s Eye* (1988). In this work, elements of fiction and autobiography, science and painting are intertwined, all with the aim of presenting the main female character Elaine Risley. In a certain way, this novel can be interpreted as the writer’s personal retrospective of her previous prose works: in *Cat’s Eye* story, we recognize an artist who is more successful than the nameless artist in Atwood’s novel *Surfacing* (1972), but also a similar

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descriptions referring to the characters of the parents and a brother in these two novels; the same childhood torturers and traumatic experiences in a ditch in Toronto have already appeared in the novel *Lady Oracle* (1976); “cat’s eyes” are also described in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), (“Eyes” – a state spy organization). These are the most noticeable intertextual elements inserted in the text body of her several novels. However, the most comprehensive literary analysis, concerning the “eye” element as a metaphor, is always particularly devoted to the female character of the artist Elaine Risley, the protagonist of the novel *Cat’s Eye*. The retrospective of her art is, at the same time, an introspection of her personality knowing this novel as the most developed version of a fictitious autobiographical text that Atwood has narrated about a woman’s life. In his study, Rama Gupta notes:

The novel thus works on two levels – retrospection and introspection – which provide some base to understand Elaine’s epistemological problems despite the phenomenological data made available by the „unreliable” first person narrator. The first person narrator replays in her mind the fragmented pieces of her childhood and reconstructs her life. (Gupta 2002: 109–118)

The main character Elaine, now a middle-aged woman, struggles to define her inner being by clarifying her own life story in different versions, in a process analogous to the narrative structure of *The Lady Oracle* (1976), *The Robber Bride* (1993), or *The Blind Assassin* (2000). The fact that Elaine is a painter indicates a number of sentences and situations relating to her art and paintings in the novel. The highlight of her art career is a retrospective exhibition in Toronto, which is the reason for her return to her hometown. But, the exhibition is also a source of stimulating energy that allows unusual double narratives, with insecure scattered memories and artistically crafted human figures on her canvases. With this technique, Elaine represents the real persons from her childhood. Indeed, these are paintings describing the duality of the protagonist’s inner self and the projection of the relationship between her precarious, unreliable memory and the human figures on the canvases. Such a relationship results in the protagonist’s autobiography, which Atwood puts into her familiar context of a main female character.

The retrospective exhibition is of a particular importance in the novel. At the end of the narration, the exhibition is involved in a part of Elaine’s closing statement, summarizing all the stages of her life. The exhibition was conceived as a chronicle of her life-time, with brief reflections on earlier paintings and detailed descriptions of five paintings of the later period in Elaine’s active, artistic creativity. However, the organizing of the canvases and their setting were entrusted to the gallery manager, so the exhibition does not show the exclusiveness and elusiveness of Elaine’s authority. The artist herself becomes an almost anonymous visitor at the opening of the exhibition: „I walk slowly

around the gallery, sipping at my glass of wine, permitting myself to look at the show, for the first time really. What is here, and what is not" (*Cat's Eye*, 404).

At its core, this exhibition merely corroborates the facts of the protagonist's life, as in the case with the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), in which Offred's narrative, transcribed from her tapes, is presented in the editor's version and not in hers. In both cases, the female protagonist describing her life remains undefined because her personal conclusions are unknown. Still, the retrospective exhibition in the novel *Cat's Eye* is the best source of information about Elaine's destiny and her past life.

The title of the novel conveys the symbolism of the "third eye". Elaine owns a toy marble which she has named a "cat's eye". She has got the feeling that the marble has been helping her see and interpret things, people and events in a different way. The only thing she could not figure out was her own personality. Even as an adult, Elaine remains an enigma to everyone, even to herself. It is certainly important to note that the first and only complete picture of Elaine's face is visible only in the photo of the advertising poster next to the gallery where her exhibition will be held. But this image was not left untouched either, because someone jokingly painted a mustache on her face. In this respect, the image shows a large number of identities and disguises. Elaine admits she could have been anything – a banker, a tourist, a housewife – and all these appearances and vocations confirm the indeterminacy of her personality and the multiplicity of her character.

Her reaction to the deformed image of her own face on the poster is a reflexive impulsive response to life. Similarly, it is certain reconciliation between past and present, which, again, opens up numerous possibilities for various interpretations and definitions of Elaine's personality. Obviously, her art canvases reflect the various states and fates of people from her closest surroundings. One of the most important portraits, entitled 'Half a Face', is dedicated to Cordelia, her childhood friend (and her torturer as well). Elaine has been searching for her constantly since she returned to Toronto, because Cordelia and her life belong to that city. Cordelia symbolically represents the destroyed half of Elaine's face. The protagonist feels incomplete as a personality as she unsuccessfully tries to find her "other half" which remains, in a way, trapped in the past. Cordelia, as Elaine's "otherness" not physically present in Elaine's life at this moment, also confirms Paul de Man's theory of double projection of the inner being (de Man 1979: 922). His essay on autobiography in literature specifically focuses on the notion of rhetorical prosopopoeia which introduces the contradiction of one person presenting with another character. During the regeneration process, the inner being separates into smaller parts and takes on the qualities of another character. De Man points out that the goal of every autobiography is to decon-

struct an inner being by describing it with its own “otherness” recognized in the dimension of familiar spaces and past time.

Atwood particularly defines two ways in which the protagonist describes herself. Her storytelling is unreliable and incomplete when she relies on her uncertain memory, but her canvases provide different descriptions. Their role is to correct distorted memories and repressed events of the past and to offer theoretical solutions. Although De Man, in the above-mentioned essay “Autobiography”, deals specifically with linguistic signifiers, in the novel *Cat’s Eye* Elaine’s autobiography refers to versions of verbalized and visual images that can also be involved in a narrative role. The protagonist recounts her personal history, along with parts of Cordelia’s story, Stephen’s story (Elaine’s brother), her parents’ stories, descriptions of John’s life (Elaine’s first husband) and Ben’s life (Elaine’s current husband) as well that marked her emotional maturation, and reflections on Mrs. Smeath’s fate (the mother of Elaine’s schoolmate).

In the novel, Elaine has managed to take the place of a storyteller and a painter. She constantly sets herself at an ever-higher level beyond the carefully introduced parameters of a personal, individual understanding of life. Atwood also places Elaine’s personal story in a broader social context. It represents, on the one hand, a historical documentary in the middle of the last century referring Toronto from the angle of a young English-speaking Canadian. At the same time, while recalling the period of her student life, Elaine gives cultural criticism of feminism in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s.

Elaine’s narrative can be interpreted from the point of view of her nation, focusing on the changing definitions of Canadian identity in the post-war period. Also relevant is Elaine’s attitude toward immigrants who, in a way, marked a certain period in her life (Miss Stuart, Elaine’s school teacher, originally Scottish; Mrs. Feinstein, a neighbour, belongs to the Jewish community; Mr. Bannerji, Elaine’s private teacher, is an Indian; Josef Hrbik, an art teacher, comes from Eastern Europe). Elaine portrayed these characters and her relationship with them in the painting ‘Three Muses’.

Margaret Atwood’s novel contributes one important dimension to De Man’s theory of autobiography – the dimension of time. Elaine’s story covers a period of nearly fifty years, from the early forties to the late eighties of the last century. This is a novel that focuses on space and time in which the narrator attempts to establish a position using three spatial coordinates, together with one temporal coordinate. On her return to Toronto, Elaine discovers that she lives in two parallel temporal dimensions while constantly remembering her past. She paraphrases the words of her late brother Stephen, a physicist who

explained the existence of four dimensions of space and time. As it is often the case in biographical texts, her story is also a memory of the dead.

At the very beginning of the novel, we encounter Steven's scientific ideas and speculations: "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space" (*Cat's Eye*, 11). In each sentence, the echo of Steven's voice is heard in allusions to his theories of space and time, the curved space, the expanded universe, light, black holes. Steven's scientific enthusiasm has significantly shaped Elaine's imagination, so that her paintings and his theories span the same realm of speculation and mysterious laws that rule the universe. They both try to reconstruct the past – Steven researching physics and mathematics, and Elaine using her memories and imagery from the fantasy world. Steven's discourse, taken from theoretical physics, provides a conceptual framework for Elaine's paintings as her art describes time. For this reason, the most important memory of her brother's influence is probably reflected in the last painting 'Unified Field Theory'. Elaine is not officially educated as a painter but as a biologist. However, like her father, she made drawings of worms and other animals. The boundaries between science and art disappear on her canvases as Elaine's paintings and sketches show how one woman successfully follows a scientific discourse and transforms it into another medium, into her own paintings.

Whether she is a biologist or a painter, Elaine's primary activity is observation. The eyes are very important, but also microscopes, telescopes, lenses, because with their help, she can magnify objects or focus better than if she uses only her own sense of sight. In this context, attention can be paid to the significance of the title of the novel *Cat's Eye*. It is certain that a marble called 'cat's eye' is a reference object in the text and we first get to know it in Elaine's childhood. The marble signifies multiple meanings and roles because, from the perspective of a nine-year-old girl, it represents Elaine's symbolic secret defense against her torturers and friends at the same time. Later, she overcomes such moments but, again, finds the same marble among other long-forgotten things in the attic of her family home. Suddenly, that toy transforms into an imagination and becomes her "third eye". Since the marble has been appropriated by a nine-year-old girl and declared a subject of supernatural powers that can protect her, the 'cat's eye' becomes her talisman and a mark and symbol of her personal defense.

The 'cat's eye' soon functions as a link among contradictory feelings that change in Elaine, and simultaneously, the feelings she is aware of – fear, desire, love, hatred and resistance to Cordelia, Grace and Carol, to schoolmates, during the period when Cordelia, as a superior girl, had the greatest power over Elaine. "For Elaine, friendship with three girls is an attempt to be accepted and loved, a desire that almost pays for life. Elaine speaks from the position of the other

person who loves and gives” (Dojčinović-Nešić 2006: 114). Then, suddenly, a ‘cat’s eye’ marble pops up and completely distorts Elaine’s relationship with the girls. As a ‘third eye’, the marble began to function outside of Elaine’s real conception while, left by her friends, she lay in the snow, in the dark, having a vision of the Virgin Mary. After this agony, Elaine’s newly gained independence was marked by the presence and the ‘cat’s eye’ sign.

Many years later, Elaine would interpret this event as a sign of the power of artistic vision and the ‘cat’s eye’ would appear in all Elaine’s paintings as her artistic signature.

The marble completely disappears from her memory and storytelling during the adolescent period in the complex process of suppressing childhood memories. But her images corroborate a different version of the discontinuity of the narrative, as well as an alternative description of her personality. The canvases emphasize the special meanings of several versions of the discontinuous narrative produced by Elaine’s conscious part of the mind. These (sub)versions reveal an extremely complex web of conflicting energies, as well as the conscious and unconscious action of the mind, which all together create the protagonist’s pronounced personal subjectivity to the role of the marble. The presence of the ‘cat’s eye’ was signalled in Elaine’s fascination with the effects of glass when she studied the history of visual styles. Later, she draws a ‘cat’s eye’ on her first canvases of still life, though these motifs are barely noticeable. She also uses her eyes as parts of the painting, especially when she artistically portrays Mrs. Smeath watching Elaine with her hostile looks. It is a form of revenge that her nous could not understand, either at the time the picture was created or when at the feminist play in Toronto, her images were attacked by an unknown woman throwing ink at them.

One situation never came to its full explanation – moments of Elaine’s enlightenment and revelation: the moment when Elaine saw the Virgin Mary in her childhood, or when she found the ‘cat’s eye’ in her parents’ house after her father’s death and saw her whole life with the marble. These remain crucial moments that determined her life as an artist are represented in her last painting with the Virgin Mary with the huge marble in her hand. With that image, as a product of the imagination, the reader manages to see through because the marble being the medium, can “erase” the boundaries between imagination and reality.

The retrospective exhibition appears in the chapter “Unified Field Theory” and places its story in a rational context signalling a specific function in the autobiographical narrative. Within the parameters of theoretical physics and using painted human figures, Elaine directs an interpretation of her life story and offers numerous projections from her uncertain memory. The cracks of her memory are parts of the process in recording events within consciousness. She constantly

moves among, on the one hand, her insecure narrative while coming from the rational part of the mind, and on the other, narratives with the help of human figures as the products of Elaine's imagination. Unified field theory belongs to the discourse of theoretical physics, but to Elaine, who is not a scientist, her brother lecture seems to have a metaphysical quality. Once her brother uttered a statement that would become the basis of Elaine's personal introduction: "But there is something that must have existed before. That something is the theoretical framework, the parameters within which the laws of energy must operate" (*Cat's Eye*, 332).

This is the connection between the cosmic order and human rules, and Elaine exactly paints that relationship on her canvases. But no artistic human figure fully describes her inner being. It is certain that her personality can be interpreted on the basis of the constructions of her paintings. In the retrospective exhibition, Elaine shows paintings that artistically represent her childhood and adolescence, but for the first time she exhibits five new canvases. All paintings are described in detail, which increases their importance in interpreting Elaine's nous behind the understanding of the elements of each canvas. With these images, we can follow her personal narrative of crises, discoveries and memories. However, like extremely satirical short texts in the catalog, her concise interpretations of the paintings in the exhibition can provoke the reader and the viewer of the canvases, and they independently come up with solutions to Elaine's narrative flow.

Elaine's later paintings share a different structural characteristic: they all represent the new meaning of time projected through Elaine's spiritual world. On these canvases we find the motifs of a large wall mirror or its triptychs that change the viewing angles of the painting. Elaine's paintings influence the revision of her retrospective narrative and decipher her inner being, which the protagonist begins to understand only when she observes her own canvases. Now she interprets the paintings dedicated to Mrs. Smeath differently so that she can finally understand why she hates her schoolmate's mother so much and what the reason for her revengeful thoughts is toward Mrs. Smeath. This process of transformation, from her "useless" consciousness to understanding of her imagination, occurs only during the time when Elaine "actively" watches the paintings created in her last artistic period. The painting 'Picoseconds' presents a dilemma about the reliability of memory, 'The Three Muses' describes the awareness of the strangers' kindness, 'One Wing' addresses Stephen's last moments of life. The latest canvas 'Unified field theory' synthesizes all her previous paintings and represents the most important revision of Elaine's past life and work. Elaine's figure of the Virgin Mary with a huge marble in her hand, as she hovers over the bridge where Elaine experienced the greatest trauma in her childhood, is combined with the image of her brother's cosmos. Here the figure represents the opposite sides of the united presence and past, the sacred



and the profane, the science and the arts, the universal and the individual. It is Elaine's attempt to represent a complete life in an abstract vision of the whole by painting the canvases that govern the laws of her being. The last image, like a retrospective of memory, offers only a theoretical framework for defining Elaine's inner being, allowing the illusion of wholeness that dissipates in the last chapter, entitled "The Bridge". Here, Atwood re-explores Cordelia's and Elaine's relationship to lack and loss of happiness as a basic life motivator. The reader's observation over Elaine's inner being remains partially successful. Although the reader manages to "see" with Elaine's eyes, he sees only half of Elaine's face and discerns half of her soul. The other half belongs to Cordelia.

In this version of a text about a woman's life – with dual projections of constructing a female character through insecure art models, with an emphasis on place changes, double characters and lack of complete faces – the author emphasizes the inherited instability and discontinuity of storytelling about the female protagonist and her life and, thus, undermines the generally accepted genre of autobiography. Although readers may be convinced that Elaine has been able to find her own position in the artistic creations of space and time, her unreliable narrative can always confirm the incompleteness in the characterization of the main character. Such a narrative points to a lack of continuity of the narrative or thematic level – Elaine fails to find Cordelia while staying in Toronto again after a long absence and she is left alone in her hometown. She is stranded in the space and time of the present moment, as a reminiscent of a surviving crew member on the sunken ship. Lyn Mikel Brown concludes:

As Atwood follows Elaine through the years, we understand that in these childhood relationships are the seeds of Elaine's sharp tongue and "mean mouth" toward other girls in high school, her resentment toward her mother, her alliance with men and their power, her general mistrust to women and her distance from herself. (Brown 1998: 38)

Although the opening of the exhibition is successful, Elaine does not feel completely fulfilled because Cordelia has not come to the reception. Elaine is aware of the fact that Cordelia is still, in a way, in control over Elaine and that the two of them will remain forever connected: "This is what I miss, Cordelia: not something that's gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea" (*Cat's Eye*, 421).

Having said so much to its readers, it is paradoxical for Atwood to show the limits of autobiographical text and the process of reconstructing memories



and events of the past. Atwood manages to extract and display Elaine's best qualities only with the 'Unified field theory' from which a conclusion can be drawn about personality, but personality itself is beyond the reach of concrete linguistic expression.

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Essentially, Margaret Atwood's work – fiction and poetry – is full of epiphanies referring to water and mirrors. These surfaces, with their reflective qualities, enable her writing to use the way in which this work functions, as a medium reflecting the outside world. Indeed, the major strategies of revelation and challenge that Margaret Atwood uses in her novels are intended to reflect society and its literary tradition. In novels about female artists and art (*The Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye*, *Surfacing*, *Bodily Harm*), in which women are given the role of female artists rather than artistic models, readers see female artists and storytellers reflecting on their art.

In anti-Utopian novels depicting a doomed vision of the world (*Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*), our society is reflected in Atwood's imaginary mirror by having the reflection altered and distorted. Subsequently, in her novels, the disadvantages of modern society are obviously exaggerated. Finally, in the novels about negative heroines (*The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*), where Margaret Atwood's fiction often twists the triumph of good over evil and power over the weaknesses of fictional characters, we can see that these heroines present the reflecting mirror of the circumstances surrounding them. Steven Henighan's study *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing* concludes that Canadian novels should increasingly celebrate contemporary urban reality as cities are the most inspirational arts centers, especially the Toronto literary scene. Henighan does not hide his principled stance on world globalism, believing that Canadian novelists should not "capitulate" to current transnational literary trends, but should focus on exploring local social environments that always have the universal character. In Henighan's study, cosmopolitanism does not necessarily mean the elimination of national origin but the enrichment of personal experience (Henighan 2002: 91–107).

What distinguishes the use of mirrors in Margaret Atwood's novels is the way in which these mirrors gain power – in the novel *The Lady Oracle* the female protagonist becomes a mirror herself reflecting her society. Meanwhile, she changes her identity and the circumstances in which she resides. Atwood states that we need to pay more attention, not only to what the artist says about her/his art, but also to what art itself can express, and perhaps more importantly, to what it can achieve. For Atwood, art aims not only to imitate and entertain, but also to serve a specific purpose: to unravel, challenge, and dismantle into

bits and pieces all the disadvantages of modern society. The flaws that *Cat's Eye* focuses on highlight the artistic tradition dominated by male authors, a tradition in which women tend to be models rather than artists, a tradition in which classic novels describe the process of maturity in the male character rather than the female one.

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Atwood meticulously describes the inner world of Elaine, who begins to be dominated by fear during her school days, and her vulnerability to Cordelia's "tests" and initiation she has to undergo in order to be accepted into society. Many years later, she was able to cope with the threats, pitfalls and dangers that a certain kind of friendship brings.

A special moment in Elaine's life is the introduction to Cordelia, who succeeds in replacing her family inferior position with the role of a leader among friends. Meanwhile, Elaine begins to notice the different kinds of people who renew her faith in humanity. Among them, the first is a student of her father, Bannerji, and the next person who leaves a significant positive impact on her childhood is a Jewess, Mrs. Feinstein, who hires Elaine to make company with her immovable son. Both Mr. Bannerji and Mrs. Feinstein will appear, many years later, in Elaine's paintings as her talismans, along with the "cat's eye" marble.

In the sixth part of the novel, entitled 'The Cat's Eye,' Elaine's situation worsens and she contemplates opportunities for escape and retreat from cruel girlfriends. In the end, in relation to traditionally dramatic solutions, she finds an unexpectedly happy form of solace. During St. Valentine's Day, she learns that she has received more love cards from the boys compared to Cordelia and other girls. Then Elaine discovers that the boys are her "secret allies". She also realizes that she can step out of real time when one day he loses consciousness at the Institute of Zoology. After that "incident", she teaches herself how to repeat it and begins to "mentally" reside outside her body. Heidi Slettedahl MacPherson describes all Atwood's protagonists and concludes that they refuse to accept reality out of a basic fear of being rejected by mothers, girlfriends, or men (MacPherson 2010: 51).

In the central part of the novel there is a fundamental change in the relationship between Elaine and Cordelia. During one walk, Cordelia forces Elaine to get her hat from the icy water in the ditch. Freezing from the cold, Elaine is shown the Virgin Mary, who directs her to a safe escape route. After a severe cold, Elaine returns to school but becomes resistant to teasing and insulting of her classmates. We are witnessing a key turning point in Elaine's position – she becomes the most popular girl at school, while Cordelia indulges in alcohol

and neglects teaching. Part of the explanation for Elaine's sudden position among teens is that she understands boys and their attitudes. In contrast to her adolescent affection for the male world, Elaine joins a group of feminists during her student days, which makes her powerful but also upset – the concept of sisterhood refreshes her terrible memory of her schooling with “girlfriends” led by Cordelia. A few years later, as an independent, mature woman, she becomes a member of a militant group of feminist artists, but soon realizes that she does not feel comfortable in such an association.

The narrative structure of the novel is totally controlled, almost symmetrical in its form. For example, in the middle of the novel, Elaine discovers her freedom from Cordelia by simply moving away from her and becoming independent. But towards the end of the novel, Elaine realizes that Cordelia has essentially abandoned her. These two characters, in essence, represent the two diametrically opposite sides of compatible features. The first half of the novel follows Cordelia's increasing control over young Elaine, while in the second part of the novel Elaine's power and Cordelia's collapse symmetrically grow.

The dynamic shift of power between the two main characters takes place within two larger narratives: one, in the present, in which the grown-up Elaine returns to the city of her childhood for a retrospective exhibition; the second narrative, in the past, in which Elaine's and Stephen's ongoing metaphysical conversations about the nature of time and space take place, and their discussions of human memory emerge. Every major part of the novel is framed by these conversations. The novel begins, for example, with Elaine's description of Stephen's remark that time probably does not belong to the simple concept of how we imagine it or define it. This introduction, which says that the category of time is more about dimensions than a simple line moving from the past to the present, helps us to understand the quality and capacity of Elaine's past affecting her present. However, the narratives of Elaine's experience in the present (the opening episodes of each section in the novel which establish the tone of the current chapter) illustrate Elaine's present and its influence on her pondering the past.

Parts of the novel are named after Elaine's paintings. As a consequence, the biographical context of her canvases appears in the central part of the novel, and each painted individual object is given a strong symbolic meaning. Certainly, the cat's eye marble has a special place, which becomes an anagogical metaphor, connecting many things in her life.

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Elaine and Cordelia, the two main characters of *Cat's Eye*, have much in common: childhood in the same suburb of Toronto, a talent for storytelling, mature period of life marked by, among other things, suicide attempts (Cordelia

attempted suicide in a state of complete mental collapse while Elaine (after a disappointment in her marriage with her first husband), and deceptive memories of the past about themselves. Elaine is the storyteller and protagonist of the novel, while Cordelia is the antagonist. In childhood and early youth, Elaine is apparently Cordelia's victim, but in later times, she genuinely regrets not helping her friend escape from the rehab center. Episodes like this mask the fact that the novel belongs to the category of villains' stories: there are many elements that indicate that the narrator is extremely aware of the dynamic shift of power in interpersonal relationships and is capable of gaining a leading role among students in school. However, this novel can be defined as a "coming-of-age novel" (*Bildungsroman*) or, in Elaine's case, as a "maturing artist's novel" (*Künstlerroman*).

Elaine's maturation entails a number of key moments in her personal development: an introduction to the girls' culture of the 1940s (Chapter 10); awareness of the discrimination between different classes and lifestyles in the middle class of Canada (Chapter 14); the gradual development of sexual awareness (Chapter 15). Key moments in her maturation (while under Cordelia's "rule") are related to her knowledge of "established" behavior and the punishment for "disobedience" (the reasons why she was lowered into the hole of Cordelia's yard in Chapter 20).

Her development as an artist is also of great importance in her adult period of life: attending drawing classes at the Toronto College of Art; her first exhibition with a group of authors, also in Toronto; her membership in feminist art associations in Vancouver and her current retrospective exhibition entitled 'Sub-Versions' at the Toronto Gallery. Elaine's memories are enriched with details that still can't fill the striking gaps in her memory. Therefore Elaine's art has echoes in objects "labelling" her childhood but which no longer exist. These objects were painted in a meticulous manner to replace the memories that had disappeared. The literary theorist James Steele believes that Elaine, in her canvases, humorously and satirically conveys the most important "adventures" of her life, as well as people who positively or negatively marked different periods of her maturation:

Generally speaking, the risible Elaine Risley uses humour in describing her helpers, especially members of her family, and irony and satire in describing her antagonists. Her satiric bite touches on moral, ethical, and aesthetic matters as well as on schooling, religion, and relations between the sexes. (Steele 2003: 123–124)

Although Elaine escaped Cordelia's influence after surviving the dread in the ditch, the balance of power, in fact, did not shift to Elaine until the night they passed through the city cemetery and when Cordelia was genuinely frightened by Elaine's vampire story. Then Elaine realized that she had taken the advantage

of her long-suffering tormentor. After this episode, Elaine witnesses Cordelia's vulnerability and her total collapse. Despite their different lives, Elaine and Cordelia function as twins as they complement each other. On the art canvas, with Cordelia's portrait, Elaine is presented with a face covered in translucent white cloth.

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*Cat's Eye* apparently raises the voice for women's independence in a male-dominated society and in the entire human community. In this novel, Atwood mostly attributes negative characteristics to male figures. In the mid-century heterosexual middle-class world, their roles in their families have been described as very uncomfortable and bleak. Cordelia's father, for example, rules over the feminine part of his family; Carol's father uses the belt when he chastises his daughter for the mistakes she has made. Elaine's experience shows that new generations of men have not advanced the traditional model of behaviour – one of her lovers, Josef, without any sense of responsibility, leaves her previous girlfriend pregnant, and Elaine's first husband, again, proves to be a notorious womanizer. Although her second husband Ben gives the impression of a good man, the reader learns little about him. In general, in *Cat's Eye* men play either an antagonistic or passive role. As such, they are outstriking examples of individuals who either systematically silence women or ignore them by their silence.

In the novel *Cat's Eye*, the central image is obviously a marble resembling a blue cat-eye. It often appears in a period of Elaine's turbulent emotional coming-of-age process. The power of the marble becomes Elaine's intimate secret and she accepts it as her talisman. Undoubtedly, the blue marble represents a special way in which Elaine sees the world around her – distanced and impartial. Clicker is also in her two paintings of a retrospective exhibition. One of the images is titled 'The Cat's Eye,' and features Elaine's self-portrait. The painting is a kind of recognition of the way Elaine was formed as a personality, thanks in large part to the existence of the blue marble and the "powers" that helped her see things differently from other people. In the painting, indeed, there is no drawn figure of a marble, but a large wall mirror like the famous Jan van Eyck's painting ('The Arnolfini Marriage', 1434), which reveals something that does not exist in the painting itself: three girls. Her painting suggests that these girls are not present as characters from her past but exist as a reminder of Elaine's present character.

The blue marble appears in her latest painting 'Unified Field Theory', which describes "The Virgin of Lost Things" holding a marble in front of her, where, once upon a time, a frozen girl saw a red heart in a ditch. Below the Virgin is a dark night sky, but Elaine explains that darkness hides all things that are other-

wise trustworthy. The last canvas, in fact, describes the darkness and value of seeing that darkness, as well as the essential life-changing twists that the Virgin and the blue marble represent in Elaine's renewed memory.

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