

**“Who Knows What Kind of Art I’m
Drawing onto Myself”: The
Representation of the Artist in
Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* and
*Cat’s Eye***

**“Who Knows What Kind of Art I’m Drawing onto
Myself”: The Representation of the Artist in
Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye***

by

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ABSTRACT

This work analyzes the novels *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood in order to investigate the critical discussion about representation and self-representation. Focusing on the artistic development of the two protagonists, writer Joan and painter Elaine, respectively, both novels similarly draw our attention to the processes of literary and artistic productions, which become, in the narratives, powerful media to voice and contest aesthetical and political issues of representation and self-representation. By means of parody, Atwood's narratives and the protagonists' texts and paintings revisit traditional literature and visual art, revealing that contemporary cultural production often subverts literary and artistic conventions of mainstream culture. Furthermore, as Atwood concentrates on how these two fictional artists represent themselves in literature and art, her novels also question the construction of subjectivities that is seen as an achievable product. When *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* address the issues of subjectivity in the perspective of women artists, both novels challenge the representation of women's subjectivities and their bodies in both literature and art that have endorsed, for a long time, the patriarchal view of femininity. Bearing this in mind, this thesis attempts to show the critical reflection which Atwood's representations of the artists' subjectivities foreground, and the aesthetical and political analysis which their literary and artistic works reveal in the novels.

RESUMO

O presente trabalho analisa os romances *Madame oráculo* e *O olho do gato* da escritora canadense Margaret Atwood para investigar a discussão sobre os processos de representação e auto-representação. Através do enfoque no desenvolvimento artístico das duas protagonistas, a escritora Joan e a pintora Elaine, respectivamente, ambos os romances chamam nossa atenção, de forma semelhante, ao processo de produção literária e artística, que se torna, nas narrativas, um modo poderoso de evocar e contestar questões estéticas e políticas da representação e auto-representação. Por meio da paródia, as narrativas de Atwood e as obras das protagonistas revisam a literatura e as artes visuais tradicionais, revelando que as produções culturais contemporâneas geralmente subvertem as convenções literárias e artísticas das culturas dominantes. Além disso, como Atwood se concentra na forma pela qual as duas artistas ficcionais representam o eu na literatura e na arte, os seus romances também questionam a construção da subjetividade que é vista como um produto alcançável. Quando os romances *Madame oráculo* e *O olho do gato* refletem sobre as questões da subjetividade sob a perspectiva da artista, essas narrativas contestam a representação das subjetividades das mulheres e do corpo feminino na literatura e na arte que endossam a visão patriarcal de feminilidade. Nesse sentido, a presente dissertação pretende mostrar uma possível reflexão crítica que as representações das subjetividades das artistas de Atwood enfatizam e a análise estética e política que seus trabalhos literários e artísticos revelam nos romances.

INTRODUCTION

Atwood's Aesthetics: Towards a Critique of Literature and art

Margaret Atwood is widely known as a Canadian novelist, poet and critic. She was born in 1939 in Ottawa, to a family that moved to several locations in Canada because her father, an entomologist, was carrying out his researches in the northern forests of Quebec and Ontario. After living in different places during her childhood, Atwood finally settled down in the city of Toronto, where she still resides. In 1961, Atwood graduated in English Language and Literature at the University of Toronto having, as one of her professors, the famous Canadian critic Northrop Frye.

Having started her literary experience in the sixties, Atwood watched the continuous development of Canadian literature, which, during the time she began writing, was not studied worldwide as it is today. Being part of the emergent Canadian literature with authors such as Alice Munro, Robert Kroetsch, and many others, Atwood is also known for being an active, politically engaged writer. In the last decades, she composed fifteen books of poems, six of short fiction, seven of non-fiction, six of children's stories and thirteen novels. However, Atwood's works are not restricted to the realm of literature. She has, for instance, painted water colors, which were recently published as illustrations and book covers for some of her texts (Wilson, "Eyes" 225). Her remarkable involvement with the visual arts indicates a new dimension which cannot be ignored (Wilson, "Camera" 29).

In the case of Atwood's literary works, they can be recognized for their complexity and the variety of themes which are explored, be them poems, novels, and short fiction. Susan Maclean, for instance, states that "[t]he works of Margaret Atwood are mines of many levels" (179). Critics have explored these several levels of Atwood's texts, producing an astonishing number of reviews, articles, books, and sites on the Internet,

which have rendered Atwood the title of “the most written about Canadian writer ever” (Howells, *Atwood* 6). This enormous amount of criticism published about the writer investigates the complexity of Atwood’s texts in the light of different theories and fields, such as postmodernism, metafiction, psychoanalysis, gender studies and Canadian studies, among others.

It should be highlighted that Atwood’s non-fiction brings significant contribution to literary criticism. In her works, she often expresses her preoccupation with women’s writings. Furthermore, she addresses the condition of Canadian literature even before it was widely recognized as an academic field of studies. For instance, her book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, published in 1972, has been said to provide “a useful starting point for thinking about the general directions of Canadian writing in the late sixties and early seventies” (Besner 13). Atwood’s concern with the literature of her country and with issues of gender seems to explain why she became an important figure in the development of Canadian literature and in the recognition of Canadian women’s writing.

Maybe because Atwood gives especial attention to the analysis of literary and artistic productions, she often depicts artists in her own fiction. In several of her novels and short fiction, Atwood represents the figure of a writer, a painter, a poet and other characters involved in creative production. In *Lady Oracle*, first published in 1976, Atwood portrays the young and beautiful writer Joan Foster who is in Italy in the beginning of the narrative, after having fled from the city of Toronto for the second time. Having a problematic childhood and adolescence, Joan goes to England after receiving a large amount of money as the heiress of her aunt Louisa Delacourt, moved by her mother’s abusive behavior. To be able to afford her stay in London, the protagonist begins her writing career, a profession that she hides from her friends and family, except from her

first lover, the writer Paul. Only later, with the publication of the book of poems *Lady Oracle*, the only work in which she does not adopt a pseudonym, does Joan become a well-known writer and poet. Her work is recognized by the type of writing she adopts initially, which is, in many ways, similar to the Gothic and Victorian literary styles.

In *Cat's Eye*, her eighth novel, published in 1991, Atwood depicts the middle-aged painter Elaine Risley, who has to return to the city of Toronto because of her retrospective art exhibition, after several years avoiding going back to the place in which she spent her childhood. Similarly to Atwood, the protagonist of *Cat's Eye* is also raised in several towns, as she travels constantly with her nomadic family. Because her father is a biologist responsible for researches in the forests, young Elaine and her family go to the north of the country every summer. When Elaine's family finally settles in Toronto, the protagonist and her brother Stephen go to school and begin to make friends in the neighborhood. Following the academic influence of their father, both Elaine and Stephen become brilliant students at school; however, to their father's disappointment, only Stephen decides to get involved with science. After spending a long time studying visual arts and working in the area, Elaine becomes a celebrated painter of controversial art which attracts the attention of feminists and critics alike.

Despite some differences in the age, artistic career, and personal development of the protagonists, both novels explore the lives of two complex characters, from their childhood to a turning point in their lives in which they begin to reflect about their past and also analyze their own fictional and artistic works. While, for Joan, this decisive moment occurs during her stay in a small town in Italy, when she ponders about her life and writes her last novel; for Elaine, this special event happens during the retrospective exhibition, in which she reflects back on time and examines her artistic formation. It is worth mentioning that both *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* emphasize the two protagonists' literary and artistic

development showing that Joan's texts and Elaine's visual art are also means through which they try to understand their own selves and their world. Through the fragments of Joan's novels and poems and the descriptions of Elaine's paintings, we can see that the protagonists represent the personal and social tensions they experience, especially regarding their families, friends, and lovers.

This thesis, "*Who Knows What Kind of Art I'm Drawing onto Myself*": *The Representation of the Artist in Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle and Cat's Eye*, attempts to investigate how both novels draw our attention to the processes of literary and artistic production of the protagonists, and to the role of the artist. The word artist is used here as a general term to designate the careers which involve a variety of artistic expressions. In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood defines the artist as "a writer of prose fiction, a poet or a painter of pictures" leaving out "composer, sculptors, architects and choreographers" (181). I adopt this generic meaning of the word not only because I agree with Atwood's concept, but also because it is used in literary criticism to define a type of narrative that focuses on the protagonists' engagement in creative production—the novel of the artist or *Künstlerroman*—a literary tradition of which Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* are part. The title of the thesis is a reference to an episode in the novel *Cat's Eye*, in which painter Elaine looks at her face in a mirror and ponders over the representations of her own self and worldview. Elaine's remarkable interrogation about self-representation can be compared to Joan's critique of subjectivity in her texts throughout *Lady Oracle*. The quotation in the title summarizes well both artists' attempt to challenge their self-representations.

My argument is that, through the depiction of characters who struggle to understand themselves and, therefore, question their selves through their texts and paintings, the narratives bring to the fore the construction of the artists' subjectivities and

their self-representations. Joan's literature and Elaine's art are as complex as their own subjectivities, transgressing conventional modes of representation of the subject. Furthermore, as the novels are centered on this critical analysis of the perceived subjectivity, they also address and question ideological issues related to literary and artistic self-representations. In the narratives, literature and art foreground the politics of representation in terms of gender and culture, since both protagonists experience and question the difficulty of being recognized as Canadian women artists.

Through the analysis of the representation of the woman artist in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* and *Lady Oracle*, I analyze, firstly, the visual metaphors that abound in both novels and that symbolize the self-conscious aesthetics proposed by Atwood. In order to understand the self-conscious critique of representation and of self-representation in Atwood's narratives, Chapter One, "Visual Metaphors and Representation in Literature and art," reviews the relation among art, subjectivity, and visual metaphors proposed in selected philosophical, literary and artistic works that go from Aristotle to contemporary names. Drawing upon the theories of M. H Abrams, Brian Stonehill, Linda Hutcheon, and Martin Jay, this chapter focuses especially on the shift of the view of subjectivity in the arts and literature from the Greek philosophers' proposition of an unobtrusive author to a more contemporary view in which artists are aware of their own perception. Supported by the ideas of Linda Hutcheon, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva, the inquiry of subjectivity in post-structuralism and postmodernism appears in this chapter as an essential theoretical tool for our understanding of self-representation in literature and art.

The discussion of the way that Atwood's artists represent their own selves through their works is carried out in Chapter Two, "Atwood's Visual Metaphors in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*." Focusing on the presence of unconventional visual metaphors in both narratives, this chapter concentrates on the way *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* dismantle the

view of literature and art as restricted mirrors which are often used to capture and frame the self as a complete and full subject. Through the protagonists' critical position towards their own depictions of subjectivity in literature and art, this chapter also suggests an analysis of how Atwood's view of self-representation explored in both narratives emphasizes the modern problematization about the construction of the self.

Chapter Three, "The Canadian Artist in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*," continues to deal with the self-consciousness in Atwood's novels now seen as a discussion about art itself inserted in the Canadian cultural production. In this chapter, I concentrate on the way Atwood reflects on the difficulties which Joan and Elaine face, as Canadian writers and painters, due to the historical development of their cultural heritage and the dominance of European literary and artistic traditions in Canadian literature and art. It also attempts to discuss how Atwood criticizes these literary and artistic conventions which often prevent Canadian artists from showing the creativity and richness of their own culture.

In Chapter Four, "Atwood's Portraits of the Artist as a Woman," examines the political implications of the representation of the self in Atwood's novels, underlining the question of women's subjectivities. Analyzing Atwood's representations of complex women artists, this chapter aims at showing how her novels interrogate the patriarchal tradition which suggests that femininity and artistic expression are incompatible roles. Besides, through a study of Joan's and Elaine's critical depictions of female characters and women's bodies, in this chapter, I analyze the way both narratives seem to contest traditional literature and art in which women are represented in terms of a unified identity and an idealized body.

The Conclusion, "Representation and Self-representation as a Visual and Political Practice in Atwood's Novels of the Artist," returns to the discussion of the self-consciousness of Atwood's representation, illustrated through Joan's and Elaine's

interrogation of forms of vision and of constructions of subjectivity. In this sense, this last part will emphasize that Atwood's novels and her protagonists' works can be seen as unconventional mirror reflections through which Joan and Elaine challenge the nature of literary and visual representations and reveal the indeterminacy of subjectivity. It is also an attempt to link this contemporary critique of self-representation with the political reflection on subjectivity in terms of culture and gender, which the protagonists' works bring to question.

It is my expectation that this thesis shows that, through Joan's and Elaine's interrogation of traditional forms of representations, Atwood might be proposing an aesthetics in which self-representation is seen as an alternative mode of depicting the self regarding the ideologies resulting from the construction of subjectivity.

CHAPTER 1

Visual Metaphors and Representation in Literature and Art

“Trick with Mirrors”

There is more to a mirror
than you looking at

your full-length body
flawless but reversed,

there is more than this dead blue
oblong eye turned outwards to you.

Think about the frame.
The frame is carved, it is important,

it exists, it does not reflect you,
it does not recede and recede, it has limits

and reflections of its own.

(Atwood, *Selected Poems* 183-84)

Early Notions of Representation and Self-Representation

Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye* are narratives that focus upon the process of artistic creation of two women, the recently popular novelist Joan Foster, and the successful painter Elaine Risley. By showing the protagonists’ literary and artistic experiences, both novels inevitably draw our attention to the way these two women artists regard the act of writing and painting, seen as reflections of their world and of their own subjectivities. In this chapter, it is analyzed how contemporary literature and art challenge traditional modes of representation and self-representation through the use of mirror imageries and visual metaphors, which are intimately connected with literary and artistic representations in both novels.

References to reflective surfaces and to vision, such as a variety of mirrors, marbles, glasses, and eyes, abound in the novels and are related to the protagonists’

creative processes. In *Lady Oracle*, for example, writer Joan composes a Gothic narrative in which she uses a triple mirror to perform a scene of her text in process. When Joan rehearses this scene, she becomes subject to a supernatural experience—automatic writing—and seems to be, as a consequence, hypnotized by the mirror. The experience with the mirror eventually results in the composition of her famous book of poems, which carries the title of the novel, *Lady Oracle*.

Similarly, in *Cat's Eye*, reflective surfaces have a strong effect on Elaine's artistic creation. Even before she initiates her career, reflective surfaces attract Elaine, especially the cat's eye marble. In her childhood, Elaine is fascinated by this type of marble and sees it as a talisman with the power to protect her. Her interest in the marble and other reflective surfaces increases when she studies Fine Arts at College. The painter concentrates her studies on "paintings in which there are pearls, crystals, mirrors, shiny details of brass" (335). Later in the narrative, Elaine paints the cat's eye marble, the pier glass, and other reflective objects in her works. The protagonist portrays a sphere of bluish glass in her painting *Life Drawing* (400), a round object "made of purple stained glasses" in *Three Muses* (445), and a female figure carrying a marble in *Unified Field Theory* (447).

One aspect that gains immediate visibility in this analysis is the relation between word and image, illustrated by the parallel established between the artists and their works. Joan uses these surfaces as media to create one of her narratives and Elaine paints mirrors and other reflective objects in her panels, i.e., there is a relation between literary and artistic representations and visual images. Yet, it is worth mentioning that the use of mirrors vis-à-vis the protagonists' artistic processes does not imply that Joan and Elaine regard the process of creation as a mirroring technique, and literature and art as transparent media that capture the artists' world and mind. On the contrary, Atwood uses the protagonists of *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* as well as their works to criticize conventional

views of literary and artistic representations. The presence of several reflective surfaces is a strategy used to show that such a view is part of our tradition of representation and self-representation. Atwood is actually interrogating the view of literature and art as mirroring processes through these two novels.

Therefore, in order to understand how *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* reexamine and, at the same time, put into question conventional views of visual literature and art as a mirror of the artist's or writer's mind and world, it is important to investigate the tradition of mirror images and other visual metaphors in literature, art and critical theory. In this chapter, I show the way visual metaphors are used in traditional literary and artistic representations, very often expressing a view of literature and art as mirrors that faithfully represent the artists' subjectivity and their perception of reality. On the other hand, this chapter also reveals how, in a more critical view of literary and artistic representations, contemporary reflective literature and art use mirror and other visual images as a means to challenge the process of representation of subjectivity.

The use of visual metaphors to explain artistic representation in aesthetic theories can be traced back to early literary criticism. Some Greek philosophers investigate and explain the process of literary and artistic production, often relating it, in different ways, to a mirror metaphor. In *On the Arts of Poetry*, Aristotle defines all types of what he considers artistic representations (poetry, drama and painting) as modes of imitation that differ only in their means, in the objects or in the manner of their imitations (23). For this critic, literary and artistic representation is described as an imitation of the world or as a mirror; a reflection of nature.

In *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay states that it is "generally agreed that classical Greece privileged sight over other senses," a pertinent argument that can be warranted by the strong significance of visual images in Greek art, religion and philosophy (22). For

instance, in religion, the Greeks put their gods in human shapes. In Greek art, the idealized visible form “accord[s] well with their love of theoretical performance” (Jay 23). Moreover, the importance of optics illustrates the partiality of sight in Greek culture and science (Jay 23). It is no wonder that Aristotle partakes of an ocularcentric discourse through his theories of mimesis. According to Jay, Aristotle defends “the induction and the power of sight to discriminate among more pieces of information than any other sense,” and even other Greek philosophers, such as Plato, refer to vision as “the humanity’s greatest gift” (27-28).

However, it is only at a first glimpse that Greek philosophy celebrates the function of vision and sees the positive relation between representation and the mirror. Different from Aristotle’s analysis, Plato’s analogy between mirror and representation, for instance, shows that he is suspicious of the value of literature and art. Analyzing the visual metaphors used as a basis for literary and artistic aesthetics from Greek literary criticism to the Romantic period, M.H. Abrams states, in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, that Plato uses the analogy of the reflector—mirror, water, shadows—to reveal “several unflattering consequences about the character and value of art” (30). Plato’s concept of literary and artistic representations is based on the view that literature and art are as deceiving as the images formed in these reflectors.

To show the inferior status of literary and artistic representations, Plato elaborates, in *Republic*, a mimetic theory, which is divided into three categories. According to Abrams, Plato’s first category stands for “the eternal and unchanging Ideas.” The second category, reflecting the ideal world, represents “the world of sense, natural or artificial,” and the third one, in turn, reflecting the world of senses, stands for shadows, images in mirrors, and the fine arts (8). Besides, in relation to Plato, Abrams states, “a mirror-image is only a simulacrum of an object, forced deceptively to represent three dimension by two:

hence the lowly status of art as mere appearance, far removed from the truth” (34). In other words, just like the reflections in a mirror, literary and artistic representations are also seen as twice distorted from the ideal world which Plato theorizes.

Similarly to Plato, Socrates also undervalues the mirroring nature of literary and artistic representations in *Republic*. For this critic, the artist has an easier and more direct way to represent the world since literary and artistic productions function as the act of “turning mirrors round and round” (qtd. in Abrams 30). For Socrates, the artist can “soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and all other things” by merely copying their reflection “in the mirror” of art (qtd. in Abrams 30). In this comparison of artistic creation with a mirror spectrum, Socrates suggests that, once art is a very passive and uncreative process, the “poet is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the King and from the truth” (qtd. in Abrams 8). In this traditional view, the artist’s role is not considered to be significant either.

Greek philosophy and science interrogate not only the preeminence of literature and art by referring to them as mirrors, but also the role of vision—the sense which inevitable raises the discussion about representation. Jay claims that, in Greek philosophy, “‘vision’ seems to have meant only that of the inner eye of the mind; in fact, Plato often expresse[s] severe reservations about the reliability of the two eyes of normal perception. We see *through* the eyes, he insisted, not *with* them” (Jay 27). Furthermore, an antiocularcentric view is also present in the malevolent power of vision in many of the central Greek myths, such as those of Narcissus, Orpheus, and Medusa (Jay 28). Hence, it is not a coincidence that most Greek philosophers, when associating art with mirror images and other visual metaphors, regard literary and artistic representations as imperfect.

Even though these early philosophers and critics do not value the supposedly

mirroring properties of representation, the notion of art as a mirror that helps the artist in the attempt to copy nature predominates in aesthetics, literature and art long after this period. In general, most aesthetic theories developed from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries revisit Plato, Aristotle and Socrates to formulate a view of art in which mimesis becomes a keyword. In *The Self-Conscious Novel: Artifice in Fiction from Joyce to Pynchon* Brian Stonehill defines mimesis as “the creation of a convincing and uninterrupted illusion of life.” According to the critic above, mimesis “has seemed so central to the novelist’s art that it has been possible to portray the whole of western literature as an expression of the mimetic impulse” (1). Yet, there is a significant difference between Greek criticism and the concept of mimesis used by critics from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries in the way they relate representation with visual metaphors.

While Plato, Socrates and their followers removed literary and artistic representations from their ideal world because of the illusion they might cause, the concept of literature and art as mimesis “played an important part in neo-classic theories” (Abrams 14). According to Abrams, different from the view of art as a negative and distorted mode of representation, the “recourse to a mirror in order to illuminate the nature of one or another art continued to be a favorite with aesthetics theorist long after Plato” (32). In other words, what Abrams seems to show is that in this new concept of art as a mirror and the mimetic theories that supported it, the purpose of representation is to approximate the notions of reality and illusion.

When aesthetic and art begin to value the view of representation as an interrupted illusion of life, the image of the mirror powerfully reappears in painting, fiction, and in other artistic productions during the Renaissance. According to Abrams, Leonardo Da Vinci, for instance, “repeatedly appeals to a mirror to illustrate the relation to nature both

of a painting and the mind of the painter” and the view of art as a mirror also becomes popular in comedy (32).

In literature, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* provides a good example of how a literary work uses the concept of representation based on the mirror reflection. Hamlet states that “the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ’twere, the *mirror* up to nature” (3.2.18-21, emphasis added). As observed in Shakespeare’s play, by comparing the act of playing with the act of holding the mirror to nature, this work emphasizes the view that literary representation purports to copy the world and, consequently, create the illusion reinforced in the theories of mimesis endorsed by the critics of the time. Furthermore, mirror images and other visual metaphors are also often strongly present in neo-classic aesthetic theories. The seventeenth-century French novelist Stendhal, for example, defines the novel as “a mirror wondering down a road” (qtd. in Abrams and Greenblatt 1875), which shows that the literary work is frequently thought to copy images, and even the movement, of the real world.

Stonehill claims, following Hamlet’s lines, that the “agreed task of literature and of art,” since the antiquity was and is to hold a mirror up to nature (1). According to Abrams, in this view of representation as a projection of the world, art imitates in order to please, and it pleases “only as a means to the ultimate end of teaching” (14). Thus, to create the illusion supported by mimesis and emphasized by the metaphor of the mirror, literature and art also have to teach and “achieve certain effects in an audience” (Abrams 14). For the early critics who believed that art was a medium that aims at creating realism, “the more convincing the illusion, the better the art” (Stonehill 1). In other words, mimesis was for a long time valued in literary works and visual arts because, by means of artistic realism, artists could both please and teach the audience.

As one will notice, the different theories and concepts of representation present in

the traditional notion of art, which either undervalue the mimetic property of representation or emphasize mimesis and illusion as the purposes of art, do not seem to favor subjectivity. There seems to be little room for a reflection on the artist's subjectivity or personal perception of the work of art once the focus is on an accurate and objective copy of reality.

Aristotle, who, differently from Plato and Socrates, values art and its imitative intent, also seems to reject the presence of subjectivity in representation. Aristotle endorses the artist's unobtrusiveness in the work of art by pointing out that the poet should say very little *in propria persona*, as he is not fulfilling his role as imitator when doing that (83). For Aristotle, the artists are expected to be impersonal. This argument suggests that if artists show themselves in their works, they will reveal literature and art as an artifice to the public and, thus, dismantle the illusion of art as a mimetic device and an idyllic truth that Aristotle sees as the basis of representation.

In aesthetics theories of representation formulated during the Renaissance and later, critics become aware of the presence of the artist's subjectivity in art; however, impersonality predominates in the notion of representation that has, as a purpose, an effective imitation of nature. Abrams argues that some Renaissance and Neo-Platonist aesthetics propose that the work of art be conceived to imitate something inside the artists themselves (43). For instance, some theorists suggest that literature and art function as mirrors which are turned around to reproduce aspects of the artist's mind (Abrams 45). Nevertheless, by means of metaphysical elaborations, some critics link the individual's mind to the universal and unchanging ideas of the world, and, as a consequence, guarantee the impersonality of the artist's vision (Abrams 44).

During the Renaissance, a belief in divine vision which mediates the artist's mind in literary and artistic creation also prevents the artist's subjectivity from surfacing in

literature and art. In this notion of representation, artists are expected to depict this single and ideal perception of the world, often associated to a divine vision, instead of their own personal perceptions. According to Abrams, some Renaissance critics, for instance, believe that the divine idea beamed from God into the mirror of the artist's soul. Afterwards, this idea would be projected on the written page (Abrams 44). This view that the artist's perception is mediated by a divine form of vision contributes to undermine personal expression in the work of literature and art.

With the theoretical and practical development of perspective in visual art after the fifteenth century, critics begin to value the beholder's viewpoint. Similarly to the notion of the totalitarian divine vision, this new concept of perspective demonstrates, according to Jay, a viewpoint of a monocular, unblinking fixed eye rather than that of two active, stereoscopic eyes of actual vision (54). Although the beholder, be it the painter or the viewer, functions as a central figure in the process of seeing, his or her role is still very passive. Jay claims that in these monocular visual practices, "the living bodies of both painter and viewer [are] bracketed, at least, tendentially, in favor of an eternalized eye above temporal duration" (55). Still, these speculations regarding a monocular and fixed viewpoint seem to refute the possibility of subjective perception in visual practices.

It is not only the concept of divine vision and the unblinking eye of early visual traditions that undermine artistic personal perception and, consequently, subjectivity. The notion that the artist is supposed to represent only general sentiments, elaborated later in eighteenth-century literary criticism, also seems to undercut the importance of self-expression. For some eighteenth-century critics, the concept of artistic expression also includes the representation of emotions; however, artists are often expected to express the uniformity and familiarity of feelings in their works. These critics propose that expression of sentiments should reflect general human experiences "describing what all men have

seen already” and emphasizing “the typical, the uniform, the salient and the familiar as ideals of poetic imitation” which make originality and diversity impossible (Abrams 39). Subjectivity and the presence of the artist seem to have no significance up to this point.

A gradual change in the value of a subjective perception of the artist in opposition to a representation of general and public sentiments occurs in the notion of literary and artistic representation in the eighteenth century. Critics that adopt Plato’s transcendental view of representation are not only concerned about the world of ideas. They also appear to support the expression of sentiments and thoughts, for, according to Abrams, they do not only locate the ideas in the external world, but also in the artist’s mind. As a result,

the work is conceived to imitate something inside the artist himself; and when its criterion is thus made both intuitive and introspective, art readily slips its moorings in the public world of sense experience and begins to rely instead on a vision which is personal and subjective. (Abrams 43)

This emphasis on the artist’s introspection and intuition slowly influences the view of art as impersonal and as a reflection of general human sentiments to the notion of representation as an expression of the artist’s own perspective.

Yet, this view of representation which values the artist’s personality is not as revolutionary as it appears at first, because the eighteenth-century view of subjectivity is rooted in notions of mimesis and realism. Most eighteenth-century critics believe that “the perceiving mind is a reflector of the external world, the inventive process consisted in a reassembly of ‘ideas’ which were images, or replicas of sensations and the resulting art work was itself comparable to a mirror presenting a selected and an ordered image of life” (Abrams 69). Thus, the artist’s mind is often associated to a mirror that needs to be faithful to the external world it represents in art, accordingly, restraining his or her subjectivity and creativity.

Subjectivity in Romantic Theories

When late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century theorists of aesthetics begin to substitute the view of the mind faithfully reflecting reality and the concepts of controlled creativity for a more personal expression of the artist's perspective, a different concept of subjectivity changes the notions of representation in literature and art: "By substituting a projective and creative mind, and consonantly, an expressive and creative theory of art, various romantic critics reversed the basic orientation of all aesthetic philosophy" (Abrams 69). According to this new concept, the expression of the inner world of the poet, writer and artist, that is to say, the presence of artists' subjectivity and feelings in their works, begins to be regarded as a relevant element in aesthetics theories of representation.

Although Romantic theories of representation concentrate more on the analysis of poetry, it is interesting to see how aesthetic criticism shifts from the view of mimesis, with little room for subjectivity, into a view that emphasizes the artist's personal perception and experience in literature and art. Romantic theories of representation are oriented toward the artist and focus upon the relation of the elements of the work to the artist's state of mind (Abrams 47). According to Abrams and Greenblatt, William Wordsworth's notorious view of art illustrates this transformation of the concept of the mirror held up to nature into "the spontaneous overflow of feelings" (1319). When reversing former theories based on mirror metaphors, Wordsworth locates the source of the poem not in the external world, but in the individual poet, and identifies the inner feelings of the author's as the essential material of a poem (1319).

Another revolution in the concept of subjectivity during this period occurs because most Romantic aesthetic theories do not regard the artist's mind as a passive reflector of the external world. For instance, Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge "usually agree in

picturing the mind in perception as active rather than inertly receptive, and as contributing to the world in the very process of perceiving the world” (Abrams 58). Artistic subjectivity becomes more significant when the artist’s mind is viewed as a more active and subjective projector. Nineteenth-century metaphors of the mirror in relation to representation explain how artists project their own selves in their works and often highlight artistic creativity and individuality. The reflector is, according to Abrams, reversed, reflecting a state of mind instead of an external nature (50).

The mirror metaphors which survive in this period treat representation as a reflection not simply of the outside world but also of the artists’ self-expression. The visual metaphors that focus on the artist’s passivity are gradually replaced by visual symbols that are related to creativity and, thus, to the active role of the artists’ mind in literary and artistic representations. For example, some nineteenth-century critics and writers use the images of overflow, volcano, and childbirth to refer to literary expression (Abrams 48-50). Drawing upon Abram’s analysis, Jay points out that, “[i]f the Romantic abandoned the mirror, they did so . . . in order to light the lamp of inner inspiration” (108). Hence, it appears that the mirror metaphor that undercuts the artist’s active role is set aside for the development and preeminence of the perception of subjectivity in representation.

Subjectivity in the Novel of the Artist

While the Romantics in England theorize the significance of subjectivity in literature and contribute to shatter the view of the artist as a passive reflector of the world, an important mode of literary representation of the artist is developed in Germany in the nineteenth century. By creating a new literary tradition, the *Künstlerroman* or novel of the artist, German writers introduce the artist as the protagonist of fiction and discuss the issue of subjectivity and artistic identity. The analysis of the novel of the artist, which some

writers in English literature adopt later on, such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, is significant to understand literary self-consciousness as a reflection on the artists' representation. Discussing the origin of the novel of the artist seems to be important here because both Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* can be referred to as a more contemporary type of *Künstlerroman*. Like the German novel of the artist, Atwood's fiction depicts protagonists who are involved in artistic creation and critically represent their subjectivities through art.

This narrative form portrays the artist and focuses on his or her process of artistic formation and maturity. In *Art, Alienation, and the Humanities*, Charles Reitz states that the German novel of the artist proceeds through a tortuous process of personality development to an eventual education to maturity (29). According to Reitz, in this search for knowledge that the artist-character undergoes, the novel of the artist inevitably moves toward the *Bildungsroman*, a novel that is centered on the process of learning of a character, who is not necessarily an artist. Reitz argues that, similarly to the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of the artist "searches for a mature and a viable form of artistic life. Education, here, clearly implies the passage from youthful naïveté and subjective excess, to an active and practical adulthood, a process of seasoning and esthetic self-perfection" (32). The artist-protagonist gains maturity while his or her education and artistic formation are developed throughout the narrative.

Likewise, in *O Künstlerroman de Aatoria Feminina*, Eliane Campello points out that the contemporary novel that focuses on the figure of the artist is based on two literary traditions: one of the *Bildung*, or of the formation and education of the character from his or her childhood to maturity, and the tradition of the *Künstlerroman* or novel of the artist, the narrative in which the artist or a work of art carries a structural function essential to the diegese. According to the critic above, this narrative often shows the physical and

psychological development of the protagonist (25). Yet, if on the one hand, the protagonist of the *Bildungsroman* learns with the intent to serve society in a broader context; on the other one, in the novel of the artist, the protagonist expresses, through art, the union and collision between the non-temporality of art and the historicity of mundane experience (27-28). In other words, it seems that in the novel of the artist, originated in, and at the same time distinct from, the novel of education, there is a strong preoccupation with the artist's personal experience and, thus, with the artist's autonomy. There seems to be also a tension between the character's artistic development and his or her role in society.

The discussion about the artist's personal formation plays an important role in the analysis of artistic subjectivity in the novel of the artist. In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Linda Hutcheon claims that

Out of the *Bildungsroman* . . . then came the *Künstlerroman* with its preoccupation with the growth of the artist. As in the psychological novel in general, unity of action was replaced by unity of personality—here, the artistic personality. Interpretation became interiorized, immanent to the work itself, as the narrator or point of view character reflected on the meaning of his creative experience. (12)

The above quote suggests that, by focusing on the characters' psychological development and their experience with art, the *Künstlerroman* shows a preoccupation with the artistic personality. In the nineteenth-century German novel of the artist, for instance, the artist's personality still seems to reflect a search for totality in an alienating modern society. Reitz argues that this narrative form foregrounds the modern artists' perception of the alienation of their life activity in relation to the social existence emergent from the advancing civilization at the time (31).

The focus on the value of the artist's personality and, consequently, on this conflict

between art and society differs from the excessive self-expressionism encouraged in the Romantic theories developed in England in the nineteenth century. The novel of the artist attempts to transcend merely lyrical aesthetic feelings, an argument that is coherent with the view of the novel in nineteenth-century German theories. According to Reitz, the novel is thought to reflect human desire for a new community beyond the realm of subjective and illusionary autonomy (32). Goethe's novel, *The Suffering of Young Werther*, for instance, is regarded as one of the earliest novels of the artist, portraying the negative consequences of extreme subjectivism in the formation of the artist, a problem which Goethe attempts to solve later in *Wilhelm Meister's Theatrical Mission*, according to Reitz. In this different view of subjectivity, the German novel of the artist analyzes subjectivity considering the connection between the characters and the society they live in, a relation which is one of the major points which the modern novel of the artist puts into question later.

In a more contemporary example of the novel of the artist, James Joyce discusses, through the character Stephen, the formation of an artistic identity both in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. In these narratives, Stonehill claims that “[t]he urge to create is inseparable from the assertion of identity” (55). In *A Portrait*, Stephen's construction of subjectivity and the development of his aesthetic theories are both based on his isolation. The more the narrative focuses on his private world—presenting also access to Stephen's mind through stream of consciousness—the more the protagonist develops his aesthetic speculations. MacCann, the protagonist's friend, notices that Stephen expresses himself more by means of metaphors than facts (*A Portrait* 125) since, in his search for an artistic identity, he rejects the external world (his family, politics, and the Church). While in Goethe's novel of the artist, artistic identity often questions the alienation that the artist experiences in later nineteenth-century society, Joyce's character points out that the formation of the artist's identity depends on isolation in the artistic process. Even though

Joyce's novel of the artist depicts a rather negative view of the artist's personal development, his work suggests that, in the tradition of the *Künstlerroman*, a discussion of characters' selves is significant to understand how these fictional artists view the process of literary and artistic creation.

As these two examples of the novel of the artist show, by discussing the artist's identity, these narratives often also create a tension observed in the depiction of the artistic process: the reflection both on the art and on the life of the fictional artist. Campello claims that the representation of artists and the description of how they project the world in their fictional works are significant for the conflict expressed between art and life (33). Likewise, Reitz also states that the novel of the artist articulates the harsh duality of the ideal against the real as perceived by modern artists (31). The tension between art and life in this narrative form also leads to a split in the character's subjectivity. Campello argues that the theory of the split self speaks of an artist-hero who is always in conflict with the two selves. While one self is expressed distant from life, the other one seeks in the world of experience the answers for artistic creation (38).

Expressing a more traditional view of subjectivity, these novels of the artist also describe characters who often attempt to solve the dilemma in the disintegration of their so-called identities by seeking, through art, an idealized self. In *Confessional Fictions*, David Williams argues that the representative modernist novel of the artist, James Joyce's *A Portrait*, shows a contradictory tendency of the ideology of modernism which emphasizes disunity and disintegration of subjectivity (6). In fact, in this novel, Stephen proposes an aesthetic perfection based on unity:

To finish what I was saying about beauty, said Stephen, the most satisfying relations of the sensible must therefore correspond to the necessary phases of artistic apprehension ... THREE THINGS ARE NEEDED FOR

BEAUTY, WHOLENESS, HARMONY, AND RADIANCE. (135)

In this narrative, Joyce focuses on “wholeness, proposition, and order which are evidently meant to reify (and even totalize) the personality of the artist” (Williams 6). Although Joyce’s reflection on art points out some of the doubts and difficulties to represent the artist’s self, it still emphasizes, similarly to the traditional German novel of the artist, that art can be seen as a means of representing and materializing life as beautiful, whole and harmonic, showing, thus, an ideal artistic reflection of subjectivity.

As it was shown in this section, the value of artistic self-expression and subjectivity in the Romantic literary tradition and the characterization of the artist in more traditional novels of the artist contribute significantly to give a different direction to the discussions about the artist’s self-representation in literature and art. In this sense, contemporary novels of the artist, such as *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye*, give continuation to this literary tradition, in which the artist is materialized as an important figure who analyzes the processes of representation and of self-representation. Yet, as it will be shown, Atwood’s artists foreground a more critical discussion about subjectivity than that generally encountered in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century novels of the artist.

The New Mirror of Representation and Self-representation

As discussed above, the role of the artist gains greater visibility in literature, art and aesthetic theories, acquiring a new function and importance with the novel of the artist. It is no doubt that the artist occupies a significant position in some contemporary modes of representation which foreground a critical discussion of literary and artistic production, such as Atwood’s novels *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye*. These critical literary works that problematize the issues of representation are often referred to as self-conscious literature, a term used by Brian Stonehill. According to Stonehill, self-conscious novel “may be

defined as an extended prose narrative that draws attention to its status as a fiction” (3). Likewise, Linda Hutcheon uses a similar definition to describe what she refers to as “self-reflexivity” in fiction. Although she focuses on narratives, she also briefly comments on the presence of self-reflexivity in the visual arts. Returning to an archetype of self-reflexivity, the Greek myth of Narcissus, Hutcheon makes an analogy between Narcissus’s obsession with his own self and the characteristics of some literary representations which also reflect back to themselves. Hutcheon defines these modes of representation as “narcissistic narratives.”

Stonehill argues that the self-conscious text dramatizes its own context, and therefore its own author, reader, literary history and real world, which some critics defined for a long time as external to the text (4-5). Differently from Stonehill’s definition of the self-conscious novel as a narrative which has a particular set of relations with writer, the reader, and the real world (31), Hutcheon’s narcissistic narrative seems to focus on the new role of the reader because of his or her perception of self-reflexivity. According to Hutcheon, readers are forced to acknowledge what they read as fictional while, paradoxically, they are also demanded to engage intellectually, imaginatively and affectively on the co-creation of the text (*Narcissistic* 7). Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, for instance, could be included in both categories. However, I will refer to this novel as a self-conscious narrative because the definition of self-consciousness covers the realm of self-reflexivity in a broader sense, i.e., it defines a novel that discusses literature, the role of the reader and that of the writer.

In *Cat’s Eye*, there is also a reference to the process of creation; however, Atwood uses a literary work to address the issue of representation in the visual arts. The protagonist of the narrative creates works that are also self-conscious, as I argue in the following chapter. As Elaine’s art raises a discussion about the process of visual representation and

about the role of the painter and of the viewer, the narrative works with self-reflexivity in the three levels which Stonehill uses to define self-consciousness in literature, even though, in the novel, these three parts are related to a different mode of representation. Although the self-reflexivity of *Cat's Eye* does not focus on literature itself, I believe that this definition of self-consciousness is relevant to our understanding of the artistic process which Elaine's experience with visual art brings to discussion.

The presence of this self-consciousness that critically reflects on literature, art, and the artist in fiction and in the visual arts is not as new as we tend to think. Long before the German novel had created a representative artist character highlighting the process of creation and the artist's subjective experience, some literary and artistic works had been part of a tradition of challenging representation and self-representation through a self-conscious discussion.

Linda Hutcheon argues that the novel, from the beginning, manifests a concern for the aesthetic presence of the writing novelist. According to her, as early as *Tristram Shandy*, not to mention *Don Quijote*, the reader has been asked to participate in the artistic process by bearing witness to the novel's self-analysis (*Narcissistic* 9). Hutcheon also claims that, in this self-conscious process, the writing novelist "has from the start unrealistically entered his own novel, drawing his reader into his fictional universe" (*Narcissistic* 9). In other words, even if the artist's or the writer's presence is still ideally represented, the self-conscious novel critically reveals to the reader the importance of the role of the writer or artist. In the eighteenth-century novel *Tristram Shandy*, for instance, "Sterne seems to have thrown Aristotle's advice out the window. . . Far from trying to 'speak as little as possible in his own person,' Sterne's narrator appears to do as much as is possible to draw the attention to himself as the author of his story" (Stonehill 2). Sterne's unique and challenging writing style, which calls our attention to the literary process and

the presence of this “intruding” artist, narrator or writer, seems to inaugurate a self-conscious discussion of artistic creation in the novel.

In the visual arts as well, some works are pioneers in a self-conscious reflection of artistic creation by drawing the viewer’s attention to the presence of the painter. *Arnolfini Marriage* (Fig. 1) by Jan Van Eyck and *Las Meninas* (Fig. 2) by Diego Velázquez serve as good examples of self-conscious visual works which focus on the figure of the painter. In Van Eyck’s work, the scene portrayed depicts the couple Arnolfini and a round mirror, a pier glass, hanging on the wall in the background. Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* shows the painter working and several other figures attending his model, Princess Margarida.

Hutcheon claims that in Van Eyck’s painting, the signature “Johannes de eyck fuit hic” over the pier glass becomes “part of the composition of the painting itself, signaling the artist’s presence as witness and virtuoso” (*Narcissistic* 9). Like the signature, the mirror also highlights the artist’s participation in the process of painting. This pier glass reflects other people portrayed in front of the Arnolfinis—two other people who may be a depiction of the painter himself and another person or two spectators. In this sense, the self-reflexivity of this painting seems to show the importance of the painter and even of the viewer. Similarly, Velasquez’s *Las Meninas* depicts a full sized mirror that reflects back two other figures that bear witness to the painter’s work. Apart from the reflection of the mirror, *Las Meninas* also represents the figure of painter in a way that he seems to gaze at the audience, taking into consideration the role of both the artist and the viewer.

Twentieth-century self-conscious literature and art continue the discussion of the artist’s presence and artistic development. Nonetheless, contemporary aesthetic theory and practice move further in this analysis because they also problematize the construction of subjectivity and of artistic identity. Literary and artistic works often become more critical of self-expression, subjective excesses and representation of the artist as it is depicted in

the traditional novel of the artist and in the precursors of self-conscious literature and art. Contemporary self-conscious works question the representation of the self, of a so-called artistic identity, and of the figure of the artist just like they contest the traditional view of representation itself. Thus, to understand self-representation in contemporary self-conscious works, such as Atwood's novels of the artist under discussion, it is necessary to analyze the notions of representation in contemporary self-conscious literature.

The mimetic impulse and the view of art as a mirror reflection of the world—either capturing general sentiments or reflecting artist's own feelings—are the concepts which self-conscious literature and art mostly criticize about representation. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon explains the necessity of making representation an issue in contemporary art and criticism. For Hutcheon, “by simply making representation an issue again postmodernism challenges our mimetic assumptions about representation . . . assumptions about its transparency and common-sense naturalness” (*Politics* 32). In other words, Hutcheon supports the need of challenging the aesthetic belief that regards literature and art as if they were a transparent medium and an ideal mirror that represents reality as it is.

Hutcheon also refers to this late twentieth-century movement of criticism and art that challenges representation as postmodernism. To avoid the controversies which the term postmodernism arises, I adopt Hutcheon's definitions of postmodern literature and art, which can also be applied to Atwood's novels under consideration. In *Canadian Postmodernism*, the critic argues that “postmodernism in its broadest sense is the name we give to our culture's ‘narcissistic’ obsession with its own workings—both past and present” (23). Further on, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon claims that postmodernism is “a cultural activity that can be discerned in most art forms and many currents of thought today,” nevertheless it “cannot be used as a synonym for the

contemporary” (4). Moreover, this specific philosophical and artistic movement which postmodernism stands for is, in Hutcheon’s view, very complex as “postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapable political . . . It is contradictory and works within the very system it attempts to subvert” (*Poetics* 4).

The contradictions and complexity of postmodern literature in the way they question issues such as representation and self-representation will serve as the basis for the discussion of the artists’ literary and artistic process and their construction of subjectivity in Atwood’s novels. In the case of the postmodern reflection on representation and subjectivity, it should be mentioned that postmodern literature and art challenge the traditional view of representation as transparency (*Politics* 32) and also of literature when viewed as “the seamless, unified narrative representation of subjectivity in life-writing” (*Politics* 23).

Although contemporary self-conscious literature and art challenge the mirror and old visual metaphors which insist on the transparency of representation, mirror imagery and visual references are often present in these works. This contradiction can be explained by the fact that these new mirrors, now reflecting back to art as art, do not reinforce representation in its mimetic impulse as in traditional literature and art. Rather, the mirrors of contemporary self-conscious works contest the view of representation as passive and simply imitative, showing its opacity and the impossibility of providing a transparent reflection of nature. To explain the focus on opacity and non-realism of representation in self-conscious art, Stonehill contrasts naturalistic visual art with non-naturalistic self-conscious paintings. He claims that

In a naturalistic painting, to trespass briefly upon the visual arts, the picture plane functions as a transparent window-plane *through* which one may view some depicted scene. Every element of such a painting is disposed so

as to enhance the verisimilitude of the illusion which apparently lies beyond the canvas. In non-naturalistic painting, in abstract expressionism, for example, the picture plane becomes opaque, arresting the viewer's eye *at* the plane of the canvas, focusing attention on the daubs of paint *as* daubs of paint and not as elements of a depicted reality. (23)

In other words, the self-reflexivity of non-naturalistic paintings—the way it draws the viewer's attention to the fact that the paintings is merely a representation—disrupts the traditional assumptions of representation as a mirror that deludes the viewer, attempting to reflect the world as it is. The familiar image of the mimetic mirror suggests too passive a process, whereas, the use of mirror in contemporary self-conscious representations “contests that very image of passivity, making the mirror productive as the generic core of the work” (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* 42). Thus, the use of these distinct mirrors, now opaque and not imitative, in contemporary self-conscious representation put into question the mimetic and, thus, illusionary quality of the mirror which tradition literature and art often stand for.

Contemporary self-conscious works also challenge literary and artistic conventions of representation by criticizing the simple opposition between life and art, underlining that the separation between two realms in literature and art would prove impossible. Hutcheon argues that “[r]eading and writing belong to the processes of ‘life’ as much as they belong to those of ‘art’” (*Narcissistic* 5). When contemporary self-conscious literature interrogates the distinction between reality and fiction, it also reveals, before the reader's eye, the illusion which the traditional view of art as a mirror, supported by the concept of mimesis, often masquerades. For example, Hutcheon claims that contemporary self-conscious novels often emphasize that “[f]iction is obviously fiction; as Borges has shown us, life is fictive, of our making, as well” (*Narcissistic* 19). This type of fiction, she adds, “can only

be judged in terms of its own internal validity: ‘truth’ has no significance in art” (*Narcissistic* 19).

Contesting this naïve opposition between reality and fiction, contemporary self-conscious art and theory also reveal that our perception of reality is a fabrication. According to Hutcheon, “our common-sense presupposition about ‘the real’ depends upon how that ‘real’ is described, how it is put into discourse and interpreted. There is nothing natural about the real” since “everything always was ‘cultural’ in this sense, that is, always mediated by representations” (*Politics* 33-34). In other words, our sense of reality is mediated by representation, culture and discourse.

Furthermore, contemporary literature and art also often address the problems of subjectivity and self-representation. In postmodernism, for instance, rather than “a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting” representation is seen as “an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notion of self, in the present and past” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 7). By discussing about the representation of subjectivity, some contemporary works also foreground the ideology of self-representation, that is, these works put into question the way society views the construction of people’s selves. According to Hutcheon, postmodern works contest “the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of that assumption of seamlessness” in both processes of representation and self-representation. Besides, postmodern literature also “asks its readers to question the processes by which we represent our selves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we *make* sense of and *construct* order out of experience in our particular culture” (*Politics* 53-54). Literature and art, therefore, critically demand that readers and viewers reflect on the politics which representations of the self imply. In the case of *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye*, we shall see that self-representation interrogate the way the Canadian women artists view themselves

and are viewed in society.

If, on the one hand, in the traditional novel of the artist, there is often a possibility to seek for wholeness through art even though the protagonists still find their selves in an alienating society; on the other, in postmodern literature, as is the case of *Lady Oracle and Cat's Eye*, Hutcheon argues that the search for unity, be it in the construction of the narrative, history, or subjectivity, is constantly frustrated (*Poetics* 162). Joan, Elaine and other fictional artists in contemporary novels of the artist do not see literature and art as media that facilitate the search for wholeness of the self, but as critical processes that underline the fragmentation and multiplicity of subjectivity.

Most contemporary theories of subjectivity attempt to question the ideal reflection of identity, often endorsed by the construction of subjectivity in traditional novels of the artist. Donald Hall states that the modern view of subjectivity calls forth a subject that is as unstable and fragmented as the notion of language itself (100). In this sense, post-structuralist theories, in his view, largely contribute to the understanding of this fragmented and unreachable self which postmodern and contemporary self-conscious literature and art attempt to represent. For example, Jacques Lacan's elaborated theory of how one is detached from the sense of the whole self emphasizes this fragmentation. Lacan states that, although there is a human desire for autonomy, the mirror stage shows that the wholeness and independence of the self is undercut by fragmentation (200). In these lines, Rivkin and Ryan argue that the separation between the individual and the sense of wholeness occurs when, during the mirror stage, the child's sense of identity is given from the outside making the child constitutively alienated (124).

To explain how the self cannot possibly attain wholeness in the world of objects which the symbolic stands for, Lacan explains that the body never totally meets its own being because: "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think . . . What one

ought to say is: I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think (200). For Lacan, “[t]he ‘being’ referred to is that which appears in a lightning moment in the void of the verb ‘to be’” and “poses its question for the subject” (202). In other words, as the “being” is dissociated from the body and is situated in the void of existence—the self paradoxically exists where the subject does not think—the subject cannot be conceived as an attainable whole in the modern concept of subjectivity.

Similarly, Julia Kristeva argues that from the mirror stage on, “in order to capture his image unified in the mirror, the child must remain separate from it, his body agitated by the semiotic motility,” that is, by the process of separation between the subject and its image, “which fragments him more than it unifies him in a representation” (351). As Kristeva claims, “signification exists precisely because there is no subject in signification” (352) once the symbolic cannot generate its own signifying substance (Seiden 80). Kristeva’s analysis of subjectivity brings about two important elements, the symbolic and the semiotics. The images and objects which are alienated from the child through language, after the mirror stage, “must be posited in a space that becomes symbolic because it connects the two separated positions” (Kristeva 350). In other words, the subject paradoxically experiences union and separation. Kristeva calls this conflicting process the symbolic, because the term seems appropriate for “this constant split unification that is produced by a rupture and is impossible without it” in process of construction of the self (352). As can be perceived, in post-structuralist theories, the notion of subjectivity points out a continuing human desire for self-sufficiency and, contradictorily, a feeling of fragmentation (Hall 80).

Different from Lacan, Kristeva explores the process of subjectivity in the stage prior to the symbolic, the semiotic, establishing a relation between this semiotic stage and

artistic representation. She proposes that artistic representations provide the possibility of breaking with the arbitrariness of language which the symbolic creates. Art and poetic language, different from the linguistic stage that attempts to make the self logic, distorts the symbolic, underlining the semiotic. According to Kristeva, “[i]n artistic practices the semiotic—the precondition of the symbolic—is revealed as that which also destroys the symbolic” (353). Through artistic representation, therefore, poetic language provides, as Selden puts it, “the subversive openness of the ‘semiotic’ across society’s ‘closed’ symbolic order” (80). Kristeva’s theory of subjectivity shows that literature and art often become powerful modes of representation of this complex self as they interrogate the limitations and closure of the symbolic.

In Kristeva’s discussion of the symbolic and the semiotic, she also proposes that subjectivity be seen as a construct. According to Ralman Selden’s interpretation of Kristeva’s theories, although the symbolic places the subjects in their positions, the self is still in process (79-80). While the semiotic functions as an unorganized signifying process, “[a] disorganized pre-linguistic flux of movements, gestures, sounds and rhythms lays a foundation of semiotic material,” the symbolic, conversely, “works with the substance of the semiotics and achieves a certain mastery over it” (Selden 79-80). For Kristeva, “[t]he subject is . . . perpetually in the process of construction” (qtd. in Hall 99).

While the sense of a coherent, continuous and autonomous self “is a historically conditioned and historically determined construct with its analogue in the representation of the individual in fiction” (Hutcheon *Politics* 38); on the contrary, in contemporary self-conscious literature and art, such as those by Atwood, the self is rarely represented as a finished process, highlighting the modern notion of subjectivity, as endorsed by Lacan’s and Kristeva’s theorization. Hutcheon, for example, argues that one of the consequences of the far-reaching contemporary inquiry of subjectivity is perceived in “the frequent

challenge to traditional notions of perspective, especially in narrative and painting,” in which “[t]he perceiving subject is no longer assumed as a coherent, meaning-generating entity” (*Poetics* 11). Hutcheon illustrates this perception of the complexity of subjectivity in literature with the fact that “[n]arrators in fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate” (*Poetics* 11). The difficulty to locate the characters’ selves in literature and the emphasis on their multiplicity point out that, in contemporary fiction, “[s]ubjectivity is represented as something in process, never as fixed, and never as autonomous, outside history” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 39).

Both the self-conscious discussion of representation and the contemporary interrogation of subjectivity, addressed in this chapter, contribute to our understanding of how *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye* problematize the traditional view of representation and self-representation. As I aim at showing in the following chapter, being part of a contemporary literary tradition which challenges conventional perceptions and representation of the self, Atwood’s novels also endorse the fact that, just like reality, subjectivity is also a complex fabrication that is always in process of becoming. Atwood’s novels allow us to discuss, by means of literary and artistic works, the critical analysis of subjectivity presented above in light of Hutcheon’s, Lacan’s and Kristeva’s theorizations. Besides, the critical notion of visual practice recognized as a subjective and alternative perception in contemporary self-conscious literature and art is relevant in the analysis of how the protagonists of Atwood’s novels of the artist dismantle the view of literary and artistic representations as objective and transparent mirrors.

CHAPTER 2

Atwood's Visual Metaphors in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*

O artista se coloca diante da obra como de um espelho vazio e partido, o espelho da arte moderna. Exemplificando-se então o princípio paradoxal de que, na arte, a deformação pode ser uma condição para representação.

(Oliveira 10)

I looked at myself in the mirror, wondering,
What is it about me? What is it that is so
besotting? The mirror was full-length: in it I
tried to catch the back view of myself, but of
course you never can.

(Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* 318)

The Artist and the Mirror in Atwood's Fiction

As it is shown in Chapter One, contemporary self-conscious literature foregrounds the discussion about the process of representation and, when the focus is on the figure of the artist, as it occurs in some novels of the artist, contemporary fiction also critically addresses the issues of subjectivity and of self-representation. Both *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, as self-conscious novels of the artist, show how Joan Foster and Elaine Risley see and represent their world and selves in their texts and paintings. *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* underline the slippery and fragmentary aspects of subjectivity, questioning the conventions of the representation of the self in line with the theorizations proposed by Hutcheon, Lacan and Kristeva, discussed previously. In this sense, Atwood's "postmodernist impulses work to question the very nature of selfhood as it is defined in our culture: that is, as coherent, unified and rational" (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 144). For the purpose of questioning traditional views of subjectivity in self-representation and of portraying the complexity of the subject, Atwood adopts visual metaphors, which are used by her artists Joan and Elaine.

In Joan's and Elaine's artistic development, the mirrors and other visual metaphors,

intimately connected to the productions of the protagonists' works, symbolize the way these two artists perceive their social context, especially, the way they represent their own selves. Different from the visual references of the long literary and artistic tradition which I review in Chapter One, the visual metaphors present in Atwood's novels consist of convex, fragmented, and distorting mirror surfaces and of distinct eyes. In this chapter, I intend to show how, through these visual metaphors, the aesthetics proposed by Atwood in her protagonists' texts and paintings defies both traditional notions of self-representation and the view of subjective perception in literary works and in the visual arts.

The use of visual metaphors that emphasize the complexity of subjectivity is frequent in Atwood's discussion about the artist's multiple selves. In *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Atwood claims that the artists "possess the secret identities, the secret power, and—if posterity goes their way—the last laugh. There is so much more than there seems!" (32). As a consequence, writers and artists carry not only a "Jekyll hand" and a "Hyde hand"—a reference to double identities in the famous literary piece, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*—but also the slippery, fragmented, multiple self.

To compare how literature and art represent the artist's self through mirror imagery, Atwood refers to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland and through the Looking-Glass*, in which Alice

goes *through* the mirror ... Instead of destroying her double, the "real" Alice merges with the other Alice—the imagined Alice, the dream Alice, the Alice who exists nowhere.... The act of writing takes place at the moment when Alice passes through the mirror. At this one instant the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves and Alice is neither here nor there, neither art nor life. (*Negotiating* 56-57)

In tandem with the discussions presented in the previous chapter about contemporary

notions of subjectivity, Atwood's analysis of representation shows that, when artists reflect on their own selves through the mirror of art, there is also a process of dissolution of the fragmented selves. In the same way that Alice's identities are blended, the artists' selves and their depicted identities that are reflected in the mirror of contemporary art or literature are also mixed. This view of literature and art as a mirror that problematizes subjectivity by emphasizing the several possibilities of representing the self is adopted in Joan's and Elaine's works. The visual metaphors and mirror imageries used in both novels support the complexity of the writer's and the painter's subjectivities.

Lady Oracle: The Writer through the Looking Glass of Literature

In *Lady Oracle*, the protagonist and novelist Joan Foster begins to interrogate her own self through her writing, but before composing her texts, Joan perceives that her subjectivity is very complex. Joan reflects over her multifaceted self while in the town of Terremoto, Italy, after she forges her death and flees Canada leaving behind her husband Arthur and her friends. As the protagonist and first-person narrator ponders about her past in the beginning of the narrative, she is aware that she "planned [her] death carefully; unlike [her] life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite [her] feeble attempts to control it" (3). Although Joan attempts to have control over her own identity with the forgery of this new personality in Italy, the protagonist perceives that her own self is slippery and unstable. Joan's life has "a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror" (3). Her perception of life highlights her difficulty to apprehend, control and even frame her own concept of identity.

In fact, throughout Joan's life, her subjectivity is portrayed as slippery and flabby meandering from one thing to another as she creates several possibilities of her own self. When Joan is a child, she gains a lot of weight and, later, becomes an obese adolescent, a

fact that irritates her mother who wants her to assume a different personality and another shape. Joan's mother names her after Joan Crawford, a famous North-American actress. Joan realizes that "her mother named her after Joan Crawford because she wanted [her] to be like the screen characters she played—beautiful, ambitious, ruthless" (38), but there is more about the actress who her mother wants Joan to become: "this is important: Joan Crawford was thin" (39). However, during her adolescence, Joan is completely different from what her mother planned for her. Joan's failure to turn into the beautiful and slim woman "is one of the many things for which [Joan's mother] never quite forgave [her]" (39). In Joan's personal development, Atwood creates several different and even extreme personalities for Joan to assume, dismantling the notion of a coherent self and, consequently, revealing the complexity of the protagonist's subjectivity.

Through the revelation of these other possible identities in Joan's childhood, Atwood is only preparing the reader for the appearance of a multifaceted protagonist. During her adolescence, Joan begins to identify with her aunt Louisa Delacourt, whom she calls Aunt Lou, and with the Fat Lady, one of the overweight women who pose in a freak show in the Canadian National Exhibition (85). Both female characters, who are overweight and, therefore, rejected by society like Joan, play a significant role in the construction of Joan's multifaceted subjectivities. When Louisa Delacourt dies, Joan is her only inheritor; however, according to her aunt's will, Joan can only receive the money if she loses a hundred pounds (114). After Joan is shot by an arrow in the park and almost dies of poisoned blood, she loses weight, is turned into a slim and beautiful woman, leaves her parents' house, and uses her aunt's name to open a bank account and to deposit the money received. Joan's transformation is not only affected by the fact that she becomes thinner and uses her aunt's name, but also by the fact that she assumes another personality after this event. Now, Joan is "a different person, and it was like being born fully grown at

the age of nineteen” (139). The protagonist sees herself now in “the right shape,” but with “the wrong past” (139). At this time, Joan perceives that she “want[s] to have more than one life” (139) and attempts to recreate this new self in England.

Although Joan hides her former selves, her problematic relationship with her mother, and the loss of her aunt through the creation of a different personality, the protagonist is not able to control the emergence of these several selves and the others that are to come. The Fat Lady, for example, which seems to represent her former personality, often appears in Joan’s dreams when she is younger. Even later, after Joan is married to Arthur and becomes a successful writer, she begins to dream about the Fat Lady, showing her fear that, as a public figure, her secret past and other selves are revealed for her husband and friends. Joan is “terrified that sooner or later someone would find out about [her], trace down [her] former self, unearth [her]. [Her] old daydreams about the Fat Lady returned” (250). Although she attempts “to turn off this out-of-control fantasies” and dreams which reveal her secret selves, Joan knows that “[she] couldn’t” (250) get rid of the Fat Lady and her other hidden identities. Campello argues that when Joan becomes a public person, “her hallucinations with the Fat Lady, her doppelganger, her dark twin, insistently haunt the protagonist” (139). The terrifying image of the Fat Lady as Joan’s double and Joan’s reaction to it show that it is not possible to prevent her other selves from coming to surface.

Even though most people, especially Arthur, believe that Joan is an ordinary person, “[w]hen [she] looked at [her] self at the mirror, [she] didn’t see what Arthur saw. The outline of [her] former body still surrounded [her], like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant” (213). The constitution of Joan’s subjectivity throughout her past, therefore, turns the protagonist into a more complex person than other people apparently think. This rejected past, her identification with her

aunt, plus the reinvention of another identity are her means of constructing alternative selves.

Joan's fear that people may unearth this secret former self, her double, increases when she creates another personality, the Joan who searches for escape outside her marriage. When the protagonist begins to have an affair with the poet Royal Porcupine, she says that:

This is the beginning of my double life. But hadn't my life always been double? There was always the shadowy twin, thin when I was fat, fat when I was thin . . . But not twin even, for I was more than double, I was triple, multiple . . . The Royal Porcupine had opened a time-space door to the fifth dimension . . . and one of my selves plunged recklessly through. (245)

In this passage, Joan points out her fear of her double, the shadowy twin that stands for her split between her early experience as an obese child and adolescent and the slim woman she is now, not to mention the division between the writer of costume Gothic novels and the housewife. However, the protagonist breaks with the view of her own person as double when she highlights that her secret affair renders more than the emergence of her double: this event opens up other possibilities, alternative dimensions of life, showing that Joan can also have several other subjectivities.

Campello claims that, as a matter of fact, only the identities named by Joan—Louisa K. Delacourt and Joan Foster—are not enough to reveal the possibilities of Joan's selves. These two identities are unfolded into other selves, in an endless process: it starts with her name Joan Crawford, then it shifts into the fat child Joan Delacourt in her costume of mothball—for a dancing presentation at school—later, it multiplies into the slim Joan Foster, the writer Louisa Delacourt, the reference to Siamese twins—in the Freak Show—and also the figure of the Fat Lady (Campello 141-42). Eleonora Rao also

notes that, “[a]lthough Joan the narrator encompasses all these identities within herself, it is not possible to limit her to any of them” (146).

Because Joan is portrayed as this multifaceted character, she needs an unconventional mode of representation through which to express herself, one that does not frame her multiple, split and fragmented self into an objective, single and full subject. The unique reflective surface which she adopts, a metaphor for her own view of literature, contests traditional metaphors of the mirror which predominate over literary and artistic aesthetics, as I show in the previous chapter. Instead of choosing simple mirrors that symbolize literary representation, which would limit the complexity of subjectivity, Joan prefers baroque, shattered and triple mirror surfaces. These mirrors display the fragmentation or dispersion of the self (Givner, “Mirror” par. 5).

Even before these unconventional reflective surfaces become the symbol of Joan’s self-representation in her text, they appear in several references in the novel. There are “distorting mirrors that stretched and shrank you” (86) in one of the sections of the Canadian National Exhibition. There is a reference to a fun-house mirror reflection (250) and also the three-sided mirror which Joan’s mother uses to apply make up. Other reflective surfaces also appear in the narrative such as the broken glass on the floor, the glass pane of a door in the apartment in Italy, and the baroque mirror. All these surfaces, especially the baroque and the three-sided mirrors, and the shattered glasses are used to reflect the complexity of the representation of the subject. It is important to observe that most of these reflective surfaces return in the narrative to represent Joan’s selves in her own literary texts.

The baroque mirror, the first reflective surface mentioned in the novel is not only significant for our understanding of how Joan perceives her own self as unstable and difficult to define, but it also stands for the way the protagonist’s works depict her

worldview. Joan compares her own inconsistent life with a baroque mirror, a surface “which came from following the line of least resistance” (3). In this passage, Joan seems to be aware that this reflective surface represents an artistic tradition that used to disrupt the conventions of forms of vision art in the past, the baroque art. Jay explains that:

Anti-platonic in its disparagement of lucid clarity and essential form, baroque vision celebrated instead the confusing interplay of form and chaos, surface and depth . . . As a result, it dazzles and distorts rather than presents a clear and tranquil perspective of the truth of external world. (47-48)

In other words, the notion of representation in baroque art offers a distorting, not an objective, representation of life. As a consequence, according to Jay, the representative mirror of baroque tradition is an anamorphic mirror, either concave or convex, that distorts what it represents unlike the flat reflecting mirror associated with the development of rationalized perspective. This anamorphic mirror distorts the visual images because of the effect of anamorphosis—from the Greek *ana*, “again,” and *morphe*, “form”—which “allows the spectator to reform a distorted picture by use of non-planar mirror” (Jay 48). The metaphor of the baroque mirror is noteworthy in Atwood’s critique of representation in *Lady Oracle* once this mirror is traditionally related to a disrupting notion of perspective in visual art, defying the view of representation as a clear depiction of the world.

When interpreting Joan’s observations about her several selves, not to mention her self-representation in her writings, we must consider this baroque and, consequently, disrupting, nature of Joan’s imagination. The protagonist caricatures herself and we may ask: “how objective are the perceptions of a narrator who sees herself and others through the distorting mirror of her gothic sensibility” (MacLean 187-88)? The mirrors in the narrative, thus, function as surfaces which do not confirm a single identity of the self,

instead, they point out a difference, which is inseparable from the reflecting process and opens up the possibility of disintegration and of subversive multiplicity (Campello 146). In this sense, Joan's literary self-representations, which function as this unconventional baroque mirror, distort the perceptions of her own self, emphasizing even more the inconsistent nature of her subjectivity.

Like the baroque mirror, the three-sided mirror, which plays a significant role in Joan's process of representation of her own self in her texts, also sustains the complexity of Joan's subjectivity. As I point out beforehand, the writer uses this three-sided mirror to rehearse the climax of one of her Gothic narratives, the novel *Love, My Ransom*. In this part of the story, the heroine of her book, Penelope, is kidnapped and hypnotized by the villainess with a mirror. Joan, who does not have "the least idea what Penelope would see," (218) decides to sit in front of a three-sided mirror and lights a candle. However, Joan not only performs what happens to Penelope, but she also enters the mirror, through a sort of trance, and finally sees herself in a dark room, where she undergoes a mysterious experience:

I stared at the candle in the mirror, the mirror candle. There was more than one candle. . . I was holding it in my hand and walking along the corridor, I was descending . . . I looked down at the piece of paper. There, in a scrawly handwriting that was certainly not my own, was a single word:

Bow. (219)

The first word which the writer sees in the piece of paper, however, is not delivered to Penelope, but to Joan herself. Because Joan is intrigued "to find out what it meant" (220), she continues on this attempt to write using the mirror and the candle. The result of this experience with automatic writing is her book of poems, *Lady Oracle*, which makes her a successful writer.

As the few extracts from Joan's poems in the novel show, the protagonist depicts a mysterious woman who is "*voyaging/ under the sky's arch, under the earth's arch*" (221). This female character is named Lady Oracle. Both Joan and Lady Oracle are alike in the way their selves are complex. For MacLean, writer Joan, similarly to Lewis Carroll's Alice, enters the looking-glass of her own self (185) through her writing experience. Like Atwood's protagonist, the woman who Joan sees and writes about also carries several identities. They are both "*one and three*" (225). Moreover, Joan's and Lady Oracle's lives seem to be interconnected once this poem foresees the upcoming events in the writer's life. Lady Oracle seems to be traveling in a boat to encounter her death and, similarly, Joan also uses a boat to forge her death in Lake Ontario.

The shattered mirror is also significant to underline Joan's process of depiction of a complex self. It also serves as a metaphor for the book she writes in Italy, *Stalked by Love*, which consists of a fragmented narrative. During the period Joan is in Italy, her past and her memories become confusing just like the book that she is composing there. In Chapter Thirty-four, in one of the writer's hallucinations about her past, the ghost of her mother climbs the trellis and presses her face against the glass of the door (329). Joan approaches the ghost; however, "the glass was between [them]" and Joan has to go through the glass (330). Joan shakes the door and smashes the glass, which hurts her bare feet when, in the following day, she "dance[s] right through the broken glass" (335). When Joan shatters the glass, she is symbolically trying to break not only this flat reflective surface, but also the controlled and single self—she decides to be only Joan Delacourt in the town of Terremoto—which she attempts to create with her escapist life in Italy. MacLean argues that when Joan literally smashes through the glass barrier that separates her self from her past, her mother, and from her heroines, she begins to understand and come to terms with her past and with her several selves (185).

Thus, it is not a coincidence that, in Chapter Thirty-six, her *Stalked by Love* is turned into a chaotic and fragmented narrative after the episode of the broken glass. The writer returns to her book and realizes that it now functions as an unconventional mirror that questions any single identity of her characters Charlotte and Felicia. These two women also mirror, like the female figure of Joan's *Lady Oracle*, the writer's complex identities. As opposite personae, villainess Felicia and heroine Charlotte are representative of Joan's embattled personality (MacLean 192), which means that the writer's so-called identity is shattered into several possible self-representations.

However, Joan's *Stalked by Love* goes even further in the representation of the writer's multifaceted selves. The rupture in the glass barrier signals the break of the limits not only between the single identity Joan assumes and her former selves, but also between Joan and her fictional characters. As a consequence, Atwood also shatters the boundaries between the frames of Joan's life, that is, the main narrative, and the frames of the protagonist's texts. For instance, when Joan pictures the climax of this novel, in which villainess Felicia decides to enter a menacing maze, the writer, at the same time, undergoes a dangerous situation. Joan attempts to run away from a mysterious stalker, who discovers her in Terremoto. In the main narrative, Joan sees, "[t]hrough the glass pane at the top [of the door]," the "blue sky, some grayish-pink clouds" (341). Likewise, in Joan's imagination, through which *Stalked by Love* is composed, Felicia looks at the door in the center of the maze and notices that "*there was a small pane of glass at the top, through which she could see blue sky and some grayish-pink clouds*" (342). In the dissolution of these two frames, both Joan and Felicia know that behind that door there is a secret man who is after them: for Felicia, it is her husband, "*a killer in disguise*" (342), while for Joan, it is the stalker. As this example shows, the protagonist's life and her other alternative selves, represented here through Felicia, are blended, highlighting Joan's inconsistent

personalities.

The frames of the story also dissolve when Felicia Redmond reaches the center of the maze and encounters four other women who all claim to be Mrs. Redmond: “*Two of them looked a lot like her, with red hair and green eyes and small teeth. The third was middle-age . . . The last was enormously fat. She was wearing a pair of pink tights and a short pink skirt*” (341). These four women are references to Joan’s multiple selves, as MacLean notices (193). They illustrate the several personalities Joan assumes throughout the novel: the overweigh woman, the Fat Lady, stands for Joan’s adolescence while the old lady is described as her aunt Louisa Delacourt—highlighting her identification with her aunt. The other two women seem to refer to Joan’s split between the ordinary woman Joan Foster and the writer Louisa Delacourt, the protagonist’s secret identity as the writer of Gothic fiction. This division is significant for the problematization of women writers’ subjectivities, as I discuss in Chapter Four. The female characters which Joan portrays in *Love My Ransom*, *Lady Oracle* and finally *Stalked by Love* symbolize only a few of the many possibilities of representing Joan’s own selves.

The narrative of Joan’s life in Terremoto, which opens the novel, is, therefore, split between the narrative of *Stalked by Love* and the memories of her life in Toronto. In the second level of the narrative, the memories of her life in Canada, Joan’s several personalities are also represented in the novels *Escape from Love*, and *Love, My Ransom*, and finally in her book of poems *Lady Oracle*. Like Joan’s fragmented and distorting mirrors, the rupture and dissolution of these several frames emphasize the complexity of the character’s selves. The narrative, like Joan’s life, “opens, spreads, and multiplies beyond boundaries” (Givner, “Mirror” par. 1). In other words, like the unconventional mirror metaphors which Joan adopts, Atwood’s narrative also opens the possibilities to reflect upon the protagonist’s subjectivity. In this sense, Givner claims that Joan’s mirrors

can be seen as “correlative for the infinitude of process which characterizes Atwood’s narrative” (“Mirror,” par. 7). Likewise, Campello argues that, just like the characters’ split selves show Joan’s complex subjectivity, the time-space circumstance of the diegesis also reproduces her multiplicity (146). Wilson also claims that this narrative is not a static mirror which gives backwards reflections of a narrator fixed in a place. Rather, “this novel is, like Atwood’s other art, a lens which focuses and distills the narrator’s growth” (Wilson, “Camera” 39). It can be argued that the open structure of the narrative makes the representation of Joan’s complexity as a character possible without limiting it.

In the end of Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, after these frames are broken and Joan’s multiple selves come to surface, Joan realizes that she “did make a mess; but then” she does not believe that she will “ever be a very tidy person” (346). Campello argues that *Stalked by Love*, similarly to Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, is a work in process like Joan’s own life in her familiar, social and artistic experience (145). The uncertainty of the ending of the novel also parallels the complexity of Joan’s subjectivity. This final comment on her own personality as untidy and chaotic implies that the protagonist is open to several other possibilities to create and recreate her own selves just like the ending of her works and of Atwood’s narrative may render several possible interpretations.

Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* shows that writers strive “for an enlarged vision of reality, a magnified perspective on the self. Indeed, what Atwood seems to be saying is that the very act of writing may become a way of working out the multiple faces of one’s identity” (MacLean 195). Baroque, supernatural and broken reflective surfaces allow Atwood’s writer not only to disrupt flat and transparent mirrors and the traditional mode of self-representation which they symbolize, but also to express, through unconventional writing, the inconsistencies and complexities of Joan’s subjectivity.

Cat's Eye: Seeing “More than Anyone Else Looking” in Art

In *Cat's Eye*, when successful painter Elaine Risley returns to the city of Toronto to have a retrospective exhibition, she begins to reflect about her past in the place where she lived her childhood and adolescence. Through Elaine's memories—her relation with her family, friends and lovers—the novel explores the way she understands her own self through artistic expression. Similarly to what happens in *Lady Oracle*, this novel also challenges the supposed consistency of subjectivity and of self-representation, emphasizing in turn the possible ways of representing and seeing this self in visual art.

As in *Lady Oracle*, Atwood also creates a multifaceted artist in *Cat's Eye*. In the first pages, the novel opens with Elaine's notorious assertion that “[t]here's never only one of anyone” (6). This statement suggests the complex self which the artist is about to present through the recollection of her memories and analysis of her paintings. In this same passage, as the painter looks at the mirror, she gives a strange description of her face: “I'm transitional; some days I look like a worn-out thirty five, others like a sprightly fifty. So much depends on the light, and the way you squint” (6). Elaine's self-image in the mirror here is described as a kind of visual representation, a painting or a photograph. Elaine's perception of her self, as in a visual representation, is transitional and also multiple in the sense that the protagonist seems to be aware of the complexity of subjectivity.

In Elaine's flashbacks too, the narrative problematizes the concept of subjectivity seen as a unity, emphasizing the possible ways of representing and seeing this self. For example, as a child, Elaine “begin[s] to be known as the girl who faints” and, during these incidents, she feels “blurred, as if there are two of [her], one superimposed the other, but *imperfectly*” (91, emphasis added). Elaine's “imperfect” self helps problematize the notion of identity as a unity. She also puts into question a definition of identity as simply double, because, this image superimposing on Elaine is a blurred reflection of her other self. Later,

when the protagonist decides to become a painter, Elaine confesses that her life becomes multiple, and she sees herself in fragments (344) because she also feels that she is split between two places, the University and her parents' house, and between two relationships, her affair with Professor Joseph and artist Jon.

Furthermore, throughout the narrative, the recurrence of images of fragmented and distorted faces adds to this questioning of the definition of identity and self-representation as a unity. For example, the chapter entitled "Half a Face" challenges this view of the self which is, in the narrative, represented through the images of disfigured and half faces. In this chapter, Elaine's friend Cordelia tells her the story about the twin sisters: "a pretty one and one who has a burn covering half her face" (232). The disfigured sister commits suicide "in front of the mirror out of jealousy [and] her spirit goes into the mirror" to take over her twin sister's body (233). For Givner, the half-face is one of the most pervasive images of disfiguration in the novel ("Names" 66). This passage also highlights the possibility of other selves lurking in the unconscious mind, like the beautiful twin who looks at the mirror and sees the disfigured face of her dead sister, as if it were her own.

The reference to the disfigured face returns several times in the novel (Jong 100) as, for instance, in Elaine's paintings *Half a Face* and *Leprosy*. In her work *Half a Face*, the painter makes a portrait of her friend Cordelia, but the picture has "an odd title, because Cordelia's entire face is visible. But behind her, hanging on the wall . . . is another face, covered with white cloth" (249). While in this picture Elaine plays with the images of half and full faces, in *Leprosy*, she emphasizes the fragmentations and disfiguration of the self when she paints one of her girl friends' mother, Mrs. Smith, "with half of her face peeling off" (383). The play with full and disfigured faces shows that Elaine's paintings manage to capture the indeterminacy of subjectivity. Her depictions of faces reveal that anyone's self is multifaceted and cannot be seen as a simple unity: individual's self-images

can often be split, fragmented, and distorted.

As these multiple, fragmented and blurred images of other people's faces and of Elaine's self-images show, subjectivity becomes a complex issue in *Cat's Eye*. Yet, how can Elaine represent her own selves in her paintings if, as her mirror reflections show, she "remains a slippery subject, difficult to get into focus" (Howells, "Cat's Eye" 206)? Elaine adopts a view of art that contests the notions of unity and coherence of conventional self-representation. As in *Lady Oracle*, the unusual visual metaphors that abound in *Cat's Eye* signal the type of artistic representation that Elaine uses to express this slippery self without reducing the complexity of the subject. David Cowart argues that "[t]he art of Elaine Risley—or Margaret Atwood—is a mirror in which one sees an image of the artist" (129). However, Atwood "refines her examination of the shivered self" as *Cat's Eye* also analyzes "the representation of this self in the mirror of art and in the eye of the conscious and unconscious mind" (Cowart 125). This preoccupation with the artist's self and personal vision in Elaine's artistic development is significant because, more so than in Joan's aesthetics in *Lady Oracle*, in *Cat's Eye*, Atwood draws our attention to the process of self-representation as a visual practice that is also subjective.

This relation between vision and subjectivity goes far back to Cartesian theory. For Descartes, one of the pioneers in the conceptualization of representation as a construction of the mind, the images which our eyes send to our mind are perceptual judgments, not mere simulacra of the world (Jay 79). In the Cartesian model, the process of vision was believed to be created in the mind and, therefore, it was seen as subjective. Philosophers of the Enlightenment also theorized a view of representation that takes into consideration the relation between vision and the mind—often seen as the artist's consciousness. Jay states that Voltaire, for instance, uses "'idea' to refer to an internal representation in human consciousness, an image in the eye of the mind" in the sense that "[i]deas are no longer

objective realities external to the subjective mind” (84). Hence, these notions of visual practices underline that the subject’s mind also plays an important role in seeing, and that vision is less objective than it is often believed to be.

In contemporary discussions about visual representations, while most theorists develop an antiocularcentric discourse that strongly attacks vision, philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s propositions of visual practices can probably be called “a heroic attempt to reaffirm the nobility of vision on new and firmer grounds than those provided by the discredited Cartesian perspectivalist tradition” (Jay 298). In his essay “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty discusses the significance of the artist’s vision. Analyzing Cézanne’s aesthetics, Merleau-Ponty opposes imaginary visual practice to actual vision. According to the critic above, “the imaginary is much farther away from the actual because the painting is an analogue or likeness only according to the body” and “because it offers to vision its inward tapestries, the imaginary texture of the real” (258). What Merleau-Ponty suggests is that this form of vision, used by artists to represent the world in their works, differs from the vision provided by the ordinary eyes and is, thus, intimately connected to the imaginary. He also compares the painter’s vision with the symbol of the third eye, a “voracious vision, reaching beyond the ‘visual givens,’ [which] opens upon a texture of Being of which the discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuations of the caesurae” (259). While the visual image provided by our ordinary eyes is restricted, conversely, artistic vision functions as a third eye seeing through these limitations. Atwood seems to adopt this powerful concept of artistic vision in *Cat’s Eye*, allowing Elaine to portray her complex self and the world beyond the limitations of the ordinary eyes and of conventional artistic representations.

The novel interrogates the process of seeing by means of our ordinary eyes. Through Stephen Risley’s theories about time, space and vision, Elaine understands better

how one perceives the world. Stephen proposes a four-dimensional theory and asks Elaine the reason why one can only perceive reality in three dimensions. When she answers, “that’s how many there are,” Stephen explains that: “That’s how many we perceive, you mean . . . We are limited by our own sensory equipment . . . But actually we perceive four” (241-42). Her brother’s discussions about the role of vision influence Elaine’s own aesthetics, helping her question the ability of the eyes and adopt alternative ways of seeing. In his scientific concept of perception, Stephen also adds a fourth dimension besides length, height and depth: the perception of time, which plays an important role in Elaine’s art work, as some critics have argued (Howells, “Cat’s Eye” 209 and Jong 103). But what is significant in Stephen’s reflections is how they instruct Elaine to understand the limitations of her own visual organs and to develop an artistic vision that can perceive the complexity of the self.

Looking at a mirror, Elaine problematizes ordinary vision as a reflection of her self. Thinking about her perception of the people of her past, the painter interrogates:

Now I think, what if I just couldn’t see what they looked like? Maybe it was as simple as that: eye problems. I’m having that trouble myself now: too close to the mirror and I’m a blur, too far back and I can’t see the details. Who knows what kind of face I’m making, what kind of modern art I’m drawing onto myself? (6).

She questions her visual perception of friends, family and especially of her own self-image in the mirror because of the limitations of her eyes. Saying that: “Even when I’ve got the distance adjusted, I vary” (6), Elaine is aware of the variation and, thus, indeterminacy of her perceptions. In other words, even if the painter adjusts her self-reflection in the mirror or in her art, she will still have alternative possibilities of representation.

Moreover, Elaine recognizes that her reflection in some types of mirrors may not

sustain her multifaceted self. In this sense, *Cat's Eye* also interrogates traditional representation when the protagonist contests the limitations of flat mirrors and celebrates the openness and distorting qualities of convex reflective surfaces. Elaine has a negative relation with her image projected in flat surfaces as, for instance, in the pocket mirror which Cordelia holds “in front of [Elaine] and says, ‘Look at yourself ! Just look!’ Her voice is disgusted, fed up” (175) and, later, in Cordelia’s sunglasses: “There I am in her mirror eyes, in duplicate and monochrome, and a great smaller than life-sized” (329). According to Jong, flat mirrors have an entrapping quality and when Elaine sees her self reflected in these surfaces, she feels “two-dimensional” and, consequently, trapped and framed (101). Therefore, like ordinary vision, these flat surfaces seem to reduce the multiplicity of Elaine’s selves.

On the other hand, anamorphic mirrors with their distorting quality oppose flat surfaces and the traditional notion of vision which they stand for. Similarly to the reasons why Joan chooses the baroque mirror to describe her own self, Elaine prefers to view her self-reflections in anamorphic surfaces such as the pier glass and the cat’s eye marble. These convex surfaces “open up further dimensions” (Jong 101) and are more effective to represent the complexity of the painter’s subjectivities.

Studying Art and Archeology classes at the University, Elaine becomes “fascinated with the effect of glass, and of other light-reflecting surfaces” (355) and especially with the pier glass. As a consequence, she spends a long time examining the pier glass depicted in Van Eyck’s self-conscious work, *Arnolfini Marriage*. The metaphor of the pier glass significantly affects the way the novel contests flat mirror surfaces and ordinary vision because this glass surface refers to an artistic tradition that was revolutionary back in the Renaissance, Flemish art. Jong states that two aspects of this particular Flemish painting are relevant for our understanding of how it contests the notion of perception and vision in

conventional Renaissance paintings. The first aspect “is the opening up of the space surrounding the two main figures. Instead of portraying the young couple in a closed room, Van Eyck disrupts the walls around them” and the second one refers to the fact that “the painter makes himself known and present to the viewer . . . unlike medieval paintings when the artists were seen as instruments of God” (Jong 101-02). In other words, Van Eyck contests dominant artistic and visual practices of the time by breaking with monocular vision. Besides, as one of the forerunners in self-conscious artistic tradition, *Arnolfini Marriage* also focuses upon the figure and perception of the artist who is projected in the pier glass and, consequently, plays the role of an observer of the main figures painted.

In the novel, Elaine is aware of the way that Van Eyck’s pier glass problematizes reflection and perceives the distorting quality of the convex mirror used in this painting. The protagonist defines the pier glass as a “magnifying glass” which reflects the figures of the Arnolfini couple “slightly askew, as if in a different law of gravity, a different arrangement of space, exists inside” (355). Givner argues that convex surfaces are instrumental in producing reflections through repeating, although distorting the visible source (“Names” 68). It is precisely this distorting quality of the convex mirror in Van Eyck’s painting that interests Elaine (Givner, “Names” 70).

The novel not only questions visual practices by emphasizing the power of the pier glass as a convex surface which, as an anamorphic mirror, distorts and converges images, but also reworks this significant mirror metaphor as a reference to an unconventional type of vision which interrogates the process of seeing the self. The pier glass fascinates Elaine because it “reflects in its convex surface not only” the Arnolfini’s “backs but also two other people who aren’t in the main picture at all” (355). Even though in this passage Elaine does not say that the pier glass can also emphasize the artist’s own vision of the

painting, the protagonist recognizes the power of this convex glass to help her see further because “[t]his round mirror is like an eye, a single eye that sees more than anyone else looking” (355). But the most significant metaphor that refers to artistic vision and self-reflection is another anamorphic surface, the cat’s eye marble.

As a metaphor of the eye, the cat’s eye marble becomes an emblematic surface of artistic and subjective vision in the novel. It exists as a referential object in the text, as Howells points out, signaling its importance as a visual and imaginative symbol (“Cat’s Eye” 210). Similarly to the visual power of the pier glass, the cat’s eye helps Elaine create a different mode of seeing, but it also gives her an alternative representation of the self.

When Elaine is a girl and plays with marbles, she expects to win the cat’s eye which is her favorite because she firstly recognizes that this marble represents an alternative and unconventional form of vision. Elaine carries her marble in her pocket and when her friend Cordelia asks about it, Elaine thinks: “She doesn’t know what power this cat’s eye has, to protect me. Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees” (157). Through the marble, Elaine sees things differently as she later explains: “I keep my cat’s eye in my pocket, where I can hold on to it. It rests in my hand, valuable as a jewel, looking out through bone and cloth with its impartial gaze” (172). As Elaine discovers the impartial gaze of the cat’s eye marble, she realizes that there are other ways of seeing the world other than the vision provided by the ordinary eyes. She finds out that “[t]he cat’s eyes really are like eyes, but not the eyes of cats” because the marble also represents “eyes of something that isn’t known but exists anyway, like greens eyes of the radio, like the eyes of aliens from a distant planet” (69). In this passage, Elaine shows that, differently from ordinary vision, the cat’s eye marble may refer to alternative ways of seeing. In other words, she discovers that, instead of one vision, there are many visions. In this sense, *Cat’s Eye* is a novel that deals not with one single vision, but rather, with visions and distorted

perceptions (Jong 98).

This discussion about alternative visionary practices also takes us to the metaphor of the third eye in the novel. In this sense, *Cat's Eye* contests totalitarian forms of vision and representation as in Atwood's short story, "Instructions for the Third Eye." It is worth mentioning that, in this story, the narrator defines the third eye by making a distinction between vision and a possible vision: "The former relates to something it's assumed you've seen, the latter to something it's assumed you haven't" (*Murder* 78). The metaphor of third eye refers to the second type of vision. On the one hand, the actual eyes are limited to a supposed truth—the thing one assumes to have seen—on the other, the third eye "will show you that this truth is not the only truth" (*Murder* 79). This short story, thus, proposes a type of seeing beyond the totalitarian concept of vision and towards alternative visions that best correspond to the artist's third eye, which the cat's eye marble stands for in the novel.

If, when Elaine is young, the cat's eye marble represents a talisman that protects her "already functioning beyond her consciousness as her Third Eye" (Howells, "Cat's Eye" 211), later, when the marble fades away and becomes only a symbolic presence, Elaine begins to use this visionary power of the marble in order to see further. After she becomes a painter, the protagonist realizes that she used to paint things that were actually there, in front of her: "Now [she] begin[s] to paint things that aren't there" (366)—things that she can only see through her newly discovered artistic vision. Cowart argues that the cat's eye marble "is an eye . . . and a mirror—the mirror of the mind and of art. It is the eye of the painter Elaine Risley and . . . finally, a rich emblem for art and for artistic imagination" (130). Therefore, Elaine adopts the mode of reflection of this anamorphic surface to develop an artistic way of seeing the world, symbolized by alternative and imaginary visual perceptions.

Elaine also begins to use the power of her third eye, that is, her cat's eye marble, to see and understand her own selves. In this sense, this visual metaphor stands for a mode of self-representation, especially if one considers the homophonic relation between the words "eye" and "I" in English. Elaine's artistic vision affects the way she reconstructs her memories and represents her own subjectivity. For example, adult Elaine one day returns to Toronto to stay with her elderly mother, after her father dies, and discovers her old cat's eye marble in a purse in the cellar. The marble is a forgotten object that provides Elaine the opportunity to reflect back on herself and to understand her past, just like in the narrative: as she looks into the marble, the painter sees her life entirely (434), but not whole as the Joycean artist does. Givner points out that, in Atwood's poetry and prose, the writer breaks with the "unified I/eye, for she introduces an I/eye which is 'multiple and in fragments'" ("Names" 57). Actually, Elaine problematizes the "I" vis-à-vis the eye in her paintings. As Howells states, Elaine recognizes the marble as a mark of "the artist's power of vision," which appears again and again in her works as her signature ("Cat's Eye" 211). Because she adopts the distorting properties and openness of the anamorphic mirrors—the cat's eye marble and the pier glass—and the visionary power of the third eye, Elaine's paintings propose a different notion of vision and of representation.

Elaine creates an aesthetics that emphasizes alternative visual practices, which provides a less limited representation of the world than the perception of the actual eyes does. In her painting *Deadly Nightshade*, for instance, Elaine paints several eyes. In Elaine's first art exhibition, the painter is questioned: "what are all those eyes doing in it?" (383). Elaine does not answer the question, even though these many eyes seem to symbolize the several possible ways of seeing, contesting the existence of a single mode of perceiving the world.

Likewise, her painting *Unified Field Theory* also echoes the concern with many

possible ways of seeing. Through the representation of her emblematic cat's eye marble, the protagonist emphasizes the power of visions, as her painting is a reference to an incident of her past. When she is a young girl, Elaine falls into a frozen stream under a bridge but believes she is saved by the Virgin Mary. As it is never proved that young Elaine is really saved by the saint, the narrative seems to imply that she sees a sort of apparition, *a* vision, not *the* vision. In Elaine's reworking of this supposed apparition in *Unified Field Theory*, the saint holds "an oversized cat's eye marble" between her hands (447). This painting shows the power of imaginary vision because, while the saint depicted holds an unconventional visual metaphor, artists may also be seen as having the power to carry and provide imaginative visions represented in their artworks. For Howells, Elaine develops a complex representation of vision in this painting ("Cat's Eye" 214). Likewise, Jong believes that in this work, Elaine shows the significance of vision and visions for the development of her creative self as the painter combines the representation of a vision, the saint, and the sign for artistic vision, the marble (105)—two elements which emphasize alternative visual practices.

Elaine painting entitled *Cat's Eye* is perhaps the work that best interrogates, in the novel, conventional forms of vision when they are modes of perceiving and representing the self. In this painting, which the painter calls a "self-portrait, of some sorts," Elaine depicts her head "in the foreground, though it's shown only from the middle of the nose up: just the upper half of the nose" (446). Her self-portrait, as a self-conscious work, emphasizes the presence of the artist who becomes the subject of the painting, simultaneously the viewer and the viewed. Furthermore, the painter also adopts one of the unconventional visual metaphors of the novel in this work: "Behind [her] half-head, in the center of the picture, in the empty sky, a pier glass is hanging, convex and encircled by an ornate frame" (446). Reflected in the pier glass, Elaine describes, "a section of the back of

[her] head is visible, but the hair is different, younger” (446). Her pier glass functions as a magnifying lens which distorts Elaine’s face in the foreground, revealing the complexity of her self-image and the fact that she feels transitional: both young and old at the same time, as she confesses in the beginning of the narrative.

Hence, by representing eyes, mirrors and other reflective surfaces in her artworks, Elaine interrogates the ideologies of visual practices. Her visual artifacts, which are of course mediated through language in Atwood’s fiction, depict the relation between the vision and visions in which socially accepted codes of seeing are challenged by the eye of the artist (Howells, “Cat’s Eye” 204). The unconventional visual metaphors, the anamorphic mirrors and the third eye, therefore, underline Elaine’s power to represent her complex subjectivity and other people’s selves in an alternative way, unmasking the belief of a unified self and the notion of a single vision.

Using these unconventional modes of representation, writer Joan and painter Elaine go beyond the limitations of traditional self-representation and conventional visual practice to emphasize the perception of subjectivity as fragmented and slippery in their literary texts and paintings. As we can see in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye*, “just when we come to an ending and we think we can draw conclusions, the narrative circles back once more and that unforgettable voice tells us that once the portraits have been painted or the stories told, we still have not grasped the Self” (Grace 202). In other words, Atwood’s novels highlight the fact that subjectivity and the attempt to represent the self in literature and art are rather complex endeavors, challenging the belief that artists and writers can represent a fixed, coherent and whole identity in their works. By criticizing traditional concepts of the so-called identity, *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye* also reflect the modern problematization of the perception of subjectivity in contemporary literature and art, which is, in turn, endorsed by post-structuralist and postmodern theories. Furthermore, as I attempted to show, by

adopting unconventional visual images, convex and broken mirrors, both novels emphasize that, in a contemporary notion of visual practice, literature and art provide alternative modes of reflection and of vision which can sustain the complexity of the artists' selves and their multifaceted worldview.

Yet, the novels also explore, beyond the aesthetic level, the ideological and social discussion about the representation of subjectivity. As Hutcheon states, “[w]riting and ideology cannot be separated, no matter how formalist and self-conscious the writing” and “[f]or Atwood, issues of power pervade the product and the process of creation” (*Canadian* 139). In this sense, through the analysis of the artistic and personal development of Atwood's artists, *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* problematize the representation of artist's subjectivity, foregrounding the relation between the self and society and, consequently, showing the political assumptions grounded in the representation of Joan's and Elaine's multilayered selves, as Canadian women artists. The study of the political implications which Joan's and Elaine's representations and self-representations underline is addressed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 3

The Canadian Artist in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*

“The Canadian Authors Meet”

Shall we go round the mulberry bush, or shall
We gather at the river, or shall we
Appoint a Poet Laureate this fall
Or shall we have another cup of tea?

O Canada, O Canada, Oh can
A day go by without new authors springing
To paint the native maple, and to plan
More way to set the selfsame welking ringing?
(F. R. Scott 17-24)

But surely the search for the fabled Canadian
identity is like a dog chasing its own tail. Round
about and round about it goes with the tail
whisking out of sight; whereupon it proclaims
the tail elusive, fragile, threatened, or absent.
And yet, as everyone can plainly see, there is
the tail, as firmly attached to the dog as ever.
(Atwood, *Strange Things* 8)

The Complexity of Canadian Cultural Heritage

As *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* both focus on the artistic formation of a fictional writer and a painter from Canada, Atwood's representations of the artist do not escape the reflections on Canadian culture. In these two novels, Joan and Elaine use their literature and art not only to understand their own selves as artists, as I analyze in Chapter Two, and women, as I discuss in Chapter Four, but also to reflect on their positions as Canadian artists. The main protagonists and, of course, the author herself are Canadian women experiencing the sense of a culture that is often defined as split, fragmented but also multiple—a complexity that is also observed in the way the two protagonists regard Canadian literature and the visual arts. This chapter shows how *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* analyze the tradition of Canadian literature and visual arts through Joan's and Elaine's

literary and artistic representations. As I try to argue, the representations of Canadian artists in both novels also express Atwood's political analysis of the cultural heritage of her country.

Atwood's depictions of characters who ponder about the issues of Canadian culture show her own preoccupation with the formation of Canadian artists and the significance of their literature and art. When Atwood writes *Survival*, a guide with the purpose of describing "something that would make Canadian literature as *Canadian* literature" (13), she believes that "[s]elf-knowledge, of course can be painful, and the extent to which Canadian literature has been neglected in its home territory suggests . . . a fear on the part of Canadians of knowing who they are" (*Survival* 16). In this work, Atwood is concerned with the lack of interest mainly in the literary production of her country, revealing the controversies surrounding the analysis of Canadian identity, a discussion which was not as popular at the time as it is nowadays.

In *Survival*, in a chapter entitled "The Paralyzed Artist," which concentrates on the way Canadians undermine literary and artistic works produced in their own territory, Atwood addresses some of the negative consequences of the preference of foreign cultural production in Canada. To illustrate the difficulty which Canadian artists experience because of the neglect of their works, Atwood shows what could happen if someone who "lived in Canada and came to maturity not in the sixties—things *have* changed—but in the twenties, thirties, forties or even fifties" decides to become "a serious artist," involved in artistic or literary production (*Survival* 181). Atwood explains that, before the sixties, this imaginary artist would realize that most literary works "were imported from England and the States" and most paintings "were either old Group of the Seven or traveling exhibitions from abroad" (181). As a consequence, this Canadian artist would find out that his or her "own work would be dismissed by sophisticated Canadian critics as 'second-rate,'

‘provincial,’ or ‘regional,’ simply for having been produced here; by the unsophisticated it might well have been denounced as immoral” (*Survival* 181-82). The preference for foreign and hegemonic cultural productions in Canadian culture before the sixties was an obstacle for artists who wanted to create their own works.

Atwood also analyzes the representation of fictional artists in Canadian literature in *Survival*. In most of the literary pieces which she examines, such as A. M. Klein’s poem “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,” Sinclair Ross’s novel *As for Me and My House*, Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women*, Ernest Buckler’s *The Mountain and the Valley* and Graeme Gibson’s *Five Legs*, Atwood claims that the fictive artist is paralyzed. In these literary representations, fiction creates Canadian artists who have a challenging, often not recognized, professional life, not to mention the fact that some characters die before succeeding in their careers. For instance, Atwood notes that the Canadian artists depicted in *The Mountain and the Valley* and *Five Legs* undergo a less optimistic artistic experience than does James Joyce’s artist Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (*Survival* 187-89). In other words, these paralyzed or unsuccessful artists appear to represent in literature the difficulties which Canadian artists experience to have their own works recognized because of the influence of current and past artistic traditions in Canadian literature and art.

Moreover, Atwood denounces the derivative position of Canadian literature which she sees as a consequence of the negative impact of dominant literary traditions from England and the United States. The Canadian writer or poet would become successful only if he or she “was lucky enough to acquire an American or English publisher.” In this case, this artist “might get some attention from the Canadian *literati* . . . but in order to do that he would have to squeeze his works into the shapes that were not his . . . disguise himself as a fake American or Englishman” (*Survival* 182). Atwood’s protest not only points out

her active role to assist in the so-called survival of Canadian literature, but also underlines the negative influence of American and British publishing, which shapes the works of Canadian writers into their own conventions, disregarding the complexity of local artists' production. Thus, Atwood's concern with the situation of Canadian literature and art is essential for our understanding of how her own fiction represents these artists.

Her analysis in *Survival* also takes us to the discussion about the way Canadian artists in general struggle to have their own works valued in their country because of the conflicts with dominant literary and artistic traditions, such as those from Europe. The presence of these hegemonic traditions appears, in Atwood's view, to affect the formation of Canadian culture, creating a tension for the artists of her country.

In *Re-Writing Pioneer Women in Anglo-Canadian Literature*, Conny Steenman-Marcuse traces the cultural conflicts which, in literature, Canadian writers, especially women, undergo in Canada and, therefore, question in their works. For Steenman-Marcuse, "not only political and economic powers were transmitted from the mother country [England] before and after 1867 . . . but cultural power as well, with the impact of British culture still visible today" (30) in Canada. Thus, the conflicts which Anglo-Canadians experience may be a result not only of the strong political and economic ties with England but also of the cultural impact of this country in Anglo-Canadian culture.

This impact of British tradition in Canadian culture is discussed in contemporary theories in which the notion of authority is a key concept to understand the relations of power between dominant and dominated cultural traditions. In the case of Anglo-Canada, authority "belonged to England, at least until the 1960's" when "many Canadians felt themselves inferior to that centre of power" (Steenman-Marcuse 30). The authority of dominant cultural traditions still has a strong effect on contemporary literary and artistic representations of countries that went through this colonial experience, as it is the case of

Canada. One of the consequences is the fact that Canadian culture has strong ties with British cultural tradition of the past. In his preface to *The Bush Garden*, Northrop Frye ironically points out that he was “fascinated to see how the echoes and ripples of the great mythopoeic age [of English literature] kept moving through Canada” (113). In “Beyond *Two Solitudes*, After *Survival*: Postmodern Fiction in Canada,” Neil Besner sees, like Northrop Frye, the strong presence of British tradition in Canadian culture. Likewise, Besner views the dependence on British culture as negative because Canadians are “at once fixed on the past and unable to locate [their] own tradition” (10). For Besner, England creates a dilemma for Canadian literature, but so does the United States. He believes that the relation of dependence with the United States will remain unresolved as long as Canada exists as a nation (10).

This inability to locate Canadian tradition is even more problematic in literature, more so than in art, because of the fact that English is one of the official languages in the country. Canadian writers and poets have difficulties “to adjust their inherited language to an environment that defies that largely European inheritance” (Steenman-Marcuse 71). Besides, English is a language shared by many world powers, but two of them are politically and culturally influential in Canada, England and the United States. Similarly, for Hutcheon, one of the most problematic situations which Canadian writers have to face is the fact that Anglo-Canada shares a language with England, “a past political force,” and with the United States, “a current economic and cultural power” (*Splitting* 16). Having, at one side, a culture from which Canada inherited its language and literary tradition and, on the other, the economic and cultural influence of its neighbor, Canadian cultural production is consequently influenced, often negatively, by these two world powers.

Mary K. Kirtz seems to agree with Hutcheon and Steenman-Marcuse when she points out some of the negative effects of the impact of the presence of the culture of

England and the United States in Canada. According to Kirtz, “[b]y using the language they hold in common with Great Britain and the United States, Canadians have great difficulty in distinguishing themselves from the citizens of these other countries, but also in creating their own cultural artifacts” (58). In fact, what is said about Canadian literature also applies to Canadian art as they are both affected by these two hegemonic cultures.

As a result, contemporary Anglo-Canadian artists often need to challenge the influence of dominant traditions of Europe, especially of England, to create more critical works. Regarding the situation of literary criticism and production in Canada, Steenman-Marcuse argues that while critics, like Northrop Frye, state that Anglophone Canadian poets and writers are inevitably part of this European tradition, contemporary writers defy that inheritance imposed by language. On the one hand, “Frye is more inclined to use the standards of the canonical tradition,” as his preface shows; his student Margaret Atwood, on the other, questions canonical works (Steenman-Marcuse 71). Thus, critics are aware of Atwood’s critique of the authority and the power of dominant literary conventions in Canadian culture, an important political project which she begins in *Survival* with the analysis of the dilemmas experienced by Canadian artists and further explores in her novels of the artist, such as *Lady Oracle* and *Cat’s Eye*.

Like Atwood, other contemporary artists and writers assume a critical position towards European literary and artistic traditions. In *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*, Hutcheon claims that the dominant cultural tradition in Anglo-Canada is still perceived as Euro- and Amero-centrist (14). Anglo-Canadian artists often have a critical position towards these traditional centers through what Hutcheon calls double voice and splitting images. These splitting images and double voices are “tentative . . . because they stand ideologically opposed to the mastery and presumption of dominant and dominating cultures” (*Splitting* 14). As I show later, Atwood’s Canadian artists take some

of these tentative positions to go beyond literary and artistic conventions of European culture.

Likewise, in the visual arts, there is a clear opposition between Canadian art and European tradition. The works of the representative association of Canadian painters of the beginning of the twentieth century, the Group of the Seven, question the artistic conventions of Europe. Drawing upon Northrop Frye's discussion about Canadian art and fiction, Steenman-Marcuse states that the works of the Group of the Seven represent the "Canadian lakes and wilderness, as well as urban and humanized rural scenes, in such a way as to insist on the difference between the European and Canadian landscape" (71). Their emphasis on the differences between Canadian and European landscapes and themes is an attempt to create something distinct from European art—something that is part of their own Canadian perspective.

Apart from the marginal, often derivative, position in which Canadian culture is placed, Canadian literary and artistic representations very often also reflect on concepts of national identity. Canadian literature and the arts seem to struggle to understand what it is to be Canadian but seem also to question some definitions of the identity of the country. Steenman-Marcuse claims that "[i]n the past fifty years a recurrent theme in Canadian literature has been the preoccupation with defining a viable Canadian identity" (193). In the case of Canada, national identity becomes one of the central discussions in the literature produced in the country:

because of the elusiveness, in Canada, of a cohesive and single entity from which to form that identity. Literature is ideally suited to conceptualize and explore complex feelings, attitudes and doubts. As Canada is an emergent nation in cultural terms, it needs its own writers to show Canadians who they are, where they stand and where they are heading. (Steenman-Marcuse

68)

What the author argues is that through this focus on national identity, literature calls into question what it is to be Canadian showing, for instance, the problems associated with that attempt to produce a definition of the term.

In *A History of Canadian Literature*, W. H. New also analyzes the attention given to the discussion about identity in Canadian fiction. Similarly to Steenman-Marcuse, he shows that Canadian literature and criticism interrogate what can be considered Canadian in Canada's literary works. Literature highlights the fact that what it is to be Canadian goes beyond any simplistic definition. The first problem is the situation of national identity in writing because, as W. H. New puts it, Canadian literature is not enclosed by concepts of citizenship because "there were writers before there was 'Canada,' and there have been immigrants and long-term visitors since, for whom Canada has been home" (4). As a result, Canadian literature cannot represent "some single nationalistic thesis" (New 4).

Not only does Canadian writing go beyond the concept of identity based on citizenship and nationalistic thesis, but it also contests the idea of unity often evoked in the attempt to establish a national identity. Already in the seventies, literary criticism questioned the view of unity in national identity. Northrop Frye, for instance, argues that "[t]here are aspects of the tension of unity and identity . . . The former is emotionally linked to Confederation and Canadianism; the latter is more regional and more inclined to think of the country as a series of longitudinal sections" (111). Even though Frye seems to agree with an attempt of unification in Canadian identity as he claims that "the effort of making the identification" with the different people of the country whom he finds it difficult to identify "is crucial," his concept of identification, however, helps "to see that unity is the opposite of uniformity" (111). In Frye's definitions of these two concepts, "real unity tolerates dissent and rejoices in variety of outlook and tradition," whereas in

uniformity “everyone ‘belongs,’ uses the same clichés, thinks alike” creating a society which “is totally lacking in human dignity” (111). Although Frye’s concept of unity and identity and his criticism of uniformity may seem outdated, his analysis opened the ground and was quite controversial in a period when multiculturalism was not yet a popular theme in the critique of Canadian national identity.

In contemporary Canadian literature and criticism, heated debates are still part of the discussion about national identity. One of the issues which theories and literary works call into question is the concept of “doubleness” perceived in Canada, a country politically and culturally divided into a Francophone and an Anglophone culture. Hutcheon claims that Canadian culture is a fertile ground for the cultivation of doubleness because “[i]ts history offers many a binary opposition: native/colonial, federal/provincial, not to mention English/French” (*Splitting* 15). Obviously, the major doubleness which Canadians face is the division of the country into two distinct official languages, English and French. This concept of doubleness related to Canada is important to help us understand the formation of its cultural identity. In “Canada in Fiction,” Arnold Davidson argues that “this metaphor of double defining differences precludes noticing still other differences” in Canadian culture (573). The restrictive view of Canada as double prevents the recognition of the many cultural differences existing in the Canadian so-called “mosaic.” Similarly, Hutcheon points out that, although Canada’s identity is officially bilingual, it is a multicultural nation (*Splitting* 16). As a consequence, the definition of Canadian identity as split in only two cultures is extremely limited if one considers the diversity of this country.

The view of Canada as a multicultural nation helps to question simplistic definitions of national identity. Kirtz argues that the Canadian government’s official efforts to create “national difference” through the Multicultural Act, “declaring Canada to be a ‘multicultural nation within a bilingual framework,’ have indeed brought greater

awareness of Canadians as something ‘other’ than decedents of people from France, England and the United States” (55). The awareness of this multiplicity in opposition to the belief in unity or duplicity is important because, according to Steenman-Marcuse, the core of Canadianness is “ethnic diversity and cultural plurality” (74). Actually, Steenman-Marcuse believes that Canadian ethnic diversity and cultural plurality may be turned into “a position of strength and may result in a rich array of cultural manifestations” instead of “having a weakening effect on nationalism because of the lack of one paradigmatic root” (74).

In this more complex redefinition of “Canadianess,” literature and art, thus, can be seen as means of expressing the awareness of the diversity of Canadian cultural tradition. In this sense, “definitions of a single Canadian identity are suspect,” and, instead, “[i]t is the cultural plurality inside the country that most fundamentally shapes the way Canadians . . . draw the dimensions of their literature” (New 4). Similarly, Neil Besner sees in Canadian literature this problematization of unity and doubleness through an emphasis on diversity and plurality. Besner claims that the multicultural policies and the conception of Canada as a mosaic are also reflected in the surfacing of writing “from other than the two official Canadian solitudes.” Consequently, according to the critic above, Canadian literature does not stress a unified concept of Canada but questions this traditional notion about the country (14-15). Through literature and art, Canadians often problematize single definitions of national identity and hegemonic cultural representations, emphasizing the multiplicity of this cultural production.

As the critics above point out, Canadian fiction often questions the dominance of traditional cultural representations that undermine the complexity of Canadian literature and art. The literature of the country also shows that what it is to be “Canadian” cannot be defined by simplistic notions of unity and doubleness. Canadian writers, such as Atwood,

use literature to reveal the conflicts between the Canadian cultural heritage and the literary and artistic conventions of dominant traditions. As observed in the analysis of fictional artists in *Survival*, in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, Atwood also represents some of the problems which Canadian artists need to challenge in order to understand their cultural tradition and to produce their fiction and art. I shall analyze now how, by focusing on the literary and artistic productions of two Canadian artists, Atwood also reflects on the formation and heritage of Canadian culture. In this chapter, I also show the way Atwood's artists often discuss and question the notion of "Canadianess" through their works.

The Canadian Writer: A Critique of Traditional Literary Genres

Canadian literature and art, as I pointed out beforehand, problematize the impact of dominant cultural traditions in the construction of Canadian identity and artistic production. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan experiences some of these problems as a consequence of the tradition of some European literary conventions that are preserved in Canadian literature. Through Joan's literary experiments, *Lady Oracle* questions traditional notions of literature. Furthermore, through the protagonist's discussions about the influence of European cultural tradition in Canadian culture, Atwood challenges the view of Canadian literature as derivative of British literature.

When Joan flees Canada for the first time to live in England and begins to write, her first books revisit a traditional British literary genre popular in the nineteenth century, the Gothic narrative. Firstly, Joan revisits the British literary tradition to better understand it and finally ends up criticizing the conventions of the romance and especially the Gothic. In *Lady Oracle*, the rewriting of the Gothic genre and of the conventional romance foregrounds a criticism of the derivative position of Canadian literature because of the cultural dominance of British literary tradition. In this sense, Joan's rewriting can be called

a parody because it creates a rather critical relation with this tradition of British literature.

In Hutcheon's definition of parody, the concept is understood "as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (*Poetics* 26). Because there is repetition of and distancing from a certain type of representation of the past, parody "both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 101), that is to say, the parodic process legitimizes, in a more critical way, what it appropriates. Therefore, according to Hutcheon, the use of parody is not simply a flashback of a literary tradition of the past for:

parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; it is always critical . . . through a double process of installing and ironizing parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference. (*Politics* 93)

Thus, by revisiting this past representation, writers and even artists can also investigate and question certain ideologies endorsed by that representation parodied.

For Hutcheon, this investigation is possible because the play with texts of the past is used to discuss not only the text itself, in a kind of narcissism, but also the world of social, cultural, and ideological systems by which we all live (*Canadian* 9). Parody, as an intertextual reference, "brings about a direct confrontation with the issues of art to the world outside it" (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 9) and, as a result, renders the writer and the artist the possibility of making self-reflexive and political discussions about literature and art of the past. When a contemporary parodic text, such as Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, reflects back on a literary tradition of the past, in this case, the British Gothic, "it does not disregard the context of the past representation, but uses irony to acknowledge the fact that we are inevitably separated from that past" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 94). The difference is in the critical view that the writer adopts when reviewing the traditional Gothic. Hence, the use

of parody in contemporary fiction shows that past literary traditions are important; however, it also looks back by examining and criticizing the ideology and politics that these literary conventions impose.

In the conflicting situation in which Canadian literature and art are inserted, parody can be, therefore, a powerful strategy to expose the cultural, political and ideological conflicts which Canadian writers and painters, like Joan and Elaine, have to face to create a work that is not simply a copy of the European literary and artistic traditions. According to Hutcheon, in fiction, but also “[i]n historiographic metafiction, in film, in painting, in music, and in architecture, this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity” (*Poetics* 26). In the case of Canadian literature, Hutcheon sees parody as a major form of “both formal and ideological critique in feminist and Canadian fiction alike” because “they allow the writer to speak to their culture . . . without being co-opted by that culture. The irony and distancing implied by parody allow for *separation* at the same time that the doubled structure of both . . . demands recognition of *complicity*” (*Canadian* 7). In Canadian culture, parody may be used to signal the dominant literary conventions which Canadian literature and art are inevitably grounded on—by complicity—but, at the same time, need to criticize—by separating themselves from the text and art produced.

As pointed out, in Hutcheon’s definition of parody, there is legitimization of a literary or artistic tradition of the past, but there is also an ideological and political critique of those literary and artistic representations parodied. In *Lady Oracle*, the legitimating process occurs when, in England, Joan becomes familiar with the literary conventions which she later appropriates in her novels. When Joan is still an inexperienced writer, her first narratives follow the conventions of the Gothic genre. In these works, which the protagonist calls Gothic Costumes, she portrays the stereotypical male and female characters of traditional Gothic fiction such as the mysterious male protagonist who could

be a hero or a villain, the beautiful and virgin heroine who undergoes the perils and is eventually saved by the hero, and the antagonist who has to die so that the protagonist may marry the hero.

Apart from the convention of Gothic literature, Joan's first novels also install the formula of the traditional romance. In her own life, as well as in her books, the protagonist wants to experience the possibility of escaping reality through the illusion reinforced in the conventional romance, such as the utopian happy ending. She believes that she "dealt with hope" and "offered a vision of a better work, however, prosperous" (32). The protagonist also believes that by writing books in that convention she could play the "fairy godmother" to her female readers who could not escape reality in another way:

War, politics and explorations up the Amazon, those other great escapes, were by and large denied them [her readers], and they weren't interested in hockey or football, games they couldn't play. Why refuse them their castles, their persecutors and their princess. (32)

The examples above show how Joan's first novels express the necessity for escapism, one of the purposes of literature in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traditional view of romance. In this first moment of Joan's writing development, therefore, the protagonist installs the tradition in her novels by adopting the conventions of the British romance and Gothic novels.

Nevertheless, the more Joan's writing ability develops, the more she criticizes literary conventions of the past. The protagonist begins to question the characterization in the Gothic and Victorian tradition, the happy ending and flat characters of the traditional romance and of American pulp fiction by means of parody in her last two novels, the book of poems *Lady Oracle* and the novel which she attempts to write in Italy, *Stalked by Love*. The use of parody allows Joan to break with the passive assimilation of some literary

traditions that she seems to perpetuate in her first Costume Gothics. The protagonist becomes a more conscious writer and begins to see that her copy of the British Gothic Costumes is “worse than trash” (31). Furthermore, although she still needs to write using some of these conventions, Joan seems to be aware of her position and criticizes her own books, pointing out the politics behind the characterization of the heroines in the Gothic tradition. She becomes critical of her Gothic heroine, who is the “eternal virgin on the run, [her] goddess of quick money” (129). It is during this crisis which serves as a trigger for her perception of how the British conventional Gothic and other traditional genres shape her writing that Joan first subverts them in her composition of *Lady Oracle*.

Joan is aware that something is awkward in her *Lady Oracle*. As she rereads this book of poems before it is published, the writer says that there is a “half-likeness” in it, which makes her feel uncomfortable. For Joan, her

book seemed quite peculiar. In fact, except for the diction, it seemed a lot like one of [her] standard Costume Gothics, but a Gothic gone wrong. It was upside down somehow. There were the sufferings, the hero in the mask of villain, the villain in the mask of hero, the flights, the looming death, the sense of being imprisoned, but there was no happy ending, no true love. (232)

Joan realizes that somehow she adopts some of the conventions of the British Gothic which are reinforced because of the diction and some of the themes and characters she employs, however, something seems to be different. The fact that Joan’s *Lady Oracle* appears to conform to the Gothic tradition eventually renders her eminent success once she decides to publish it.

Joan’s lover, the poet Chuck (under the pseudonym of the Royal Porcupine), is also aware of the relation between her use of a past literary tradition and her success when he

observes that “[t]he only reason why [she’s] so famous is [because her] stuff is obsolete . . . they buy it because they haven’t caught up with the present yet” (240). Chuck criticizes Joan when he says that she is successful only because Canadian critics and writers have nostalgia for the literary past tradition in Canada, while he is not recognized as a poet of a more contemporary and experimentalist type of writing—concrete poetry. In this passage, Atwood also seems to denounce, through her novel, the position of the Canadian critics of the seventies, as she does in *Survival*, for passively accepting the dominance of the British literary tradition in Canadian literature.

Although the Royal Porcupine questions Joan’s literary fame and exposes the Canadian passive attachment to literary traditions of the past, he seems to miss the parodic intent which is already developed in Joan’s book of poems. As Joan’s clearly sees when she revises her *Lady Oracle*, this book no longer provides a copy of the Gothic genre, but a half-likeness and a mockery of this nineteenth-century literary convention. Coral Howells argues that, in this novel, “Atwood takes Gothic conventions and turns them inside out, weaving her illusions . . . as she transgresses the boundaries between realism and fantasy, between what is acceptable and what is forbidden” (*Atwood* 85). Joan’s own book is peculiar because it is more than a simple Gothic novel. As Joan begins to assume a more critical position in Canadian literature, her writing signals a transgression of this British genre.

In Joan’s *Lady Oracle* as well as in *Stalked by Love*, this fictional writer also appropriates several literary traditions, questioning rigid genre distinctions. In the case of Joan’s *Lady Oracle*, this book alludes to the traditional Gothic and also to another literary genre, Victorian poetry. Her book refers to Tennyson’s famous poem “The Lady of Shalott.” The similarities and differences between Joan’s *Lady Oracle* and Tennyson’s work will be discussed in the following chapter because, in this parodic reference to

Victorian tradition, Atwood appears to criticize, through her protagonist's writing, the representation of women in nineteenth-century literature.

Similarly, *Stalked by Love* is also a parody of different literary traditions, the Gothic tradition and the pulp fiction. The first conventions that Joan's *Stalked by Love* revisits and contests are the representation of characters, themes and structures of the Gothic genre. For instance, Joan challenges the portrayal of wives who are antagonists and often have to become insane or die, such as what happens to the antagonist of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, so that the female protagonist can find her happy ending with the hero. In *Stalked by Love*, Joan knows what has to happen in her plot if she follows the Gothic convention: that antagonist "Felicia, of course, would have to die; such was the fate of wives . . . Charlotte would then be free to become a wife in her turn" (316). Nevertheless, the writer begins to feel sympathy for her antagonist and, thus, breaks with that literary convention. For some reason, "Felicia was still alive and [Joan] couldn't seem to get rid of her" (317). The consequence of Joan's criticism of the Gothic is that she shifts the story from Charlotte's to Felicia's point of view:

That night [Felicia] sat in front of her vanity table, brushing her extravagant red waist-length hair . . . She was very sad; she suspected Redmond no longer loved her. If he did, she would give up her present life and go back being a loving conscientious wife. Charlotte would be dismissed and Felicia would stop having affairs with the neighboring gentry . . . I opened my eyes, got up from the typewriter . . . Sympathy for Felicia was out of question, it was against the rules, it would foul up the plot completely. (332-33)

In this passage, although Joan is aware that that point of view is not allowed in the Gothic formula, the book is changed completely. Felicia dies but returns from her death to claim

her love for Redmond and, from this point on, Joan affirms that she cannot control it anymore.

Stalked by Love seems to accept even less the conventions of the British nineteenth-century literary tradition and of the happy ending of American pulp fiction than does the poem *Lady Oracle*. After Joan makes villainess Felicia return from death to have a happy ending with the hero, Joan even attempts to change it by placing heroine Charlotte in a dangerous situation in the maze to have Redmond save her. For Joan “[t]hat was the way it was supposed to go, that was the way it had always gone before” (333) in the traditional romance and in the contemporary pulp fiction to which her readers are used. Yet, Atwood’s writer realizes that “somehow it no longer felt right” (333) because the formulas of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature no longer suit contemporary Canadian literature without a critical view. Rao claims that, at this moment, Joan realizes that “she cannot elaborate it anymore, and refuses to obey the laws of the genre” (138). Joan, therefore, needs to rewrite her plot using a more critical ending.

In her last version of *Stalked by Love*, it is Felicia who undergoes the last peril in the maze. However, the hero, expected to save the new heroine of the novel, as it occurs in standard Gothic novels and in pulp fictions, appears and “*step[s] towards her, reaching for her throat*” (343). Howells notes that, as Joan resumes her storytelling, there is a significant “shift which infringes the Gothic formula, for this time it is not the heroine who enters the maze but villainess Felicia . . . There is a further slippage of conventions in the scenario of the plot so that Joan’s book begins to look less like a Gothic romance” (*Atwood* 75). When Joan questions and combines several literary traditions in her parodic texts, Atwood’s novel underlines the fact that fiction can no longer imitate the conventions of the past or be based on a single genre definition.

Commenting on the critical review of several literary genres present in the novel,

MacLean argues that “[i]t is notable that Atwood’s parody is not limited to the Gothic romance, which is depicted as the fantasy of society, but extends over a wide range of popular art, from trashy novels and ‘True Love’ comics to tear-jerking films” (191). Likewise, Eleonora Rao claims that, as Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* rewrites older fictional forms, the Gothic, the sentimental novel, the picaresque, Harlequin romance, Victorian poetry, concrete poetry and fairy tales, this novel becomes the locus of a plurality of styles and traditions that are revisited. This strategy renders “a rereading of the Gothic tradition in *Lady Oracle*, where several generic strands and modes are interwoven. In a typical postmodern operation, this novel revisits the past ironically rewriting and using popular fiction to produce a non-escapist text” (Rao 133-34). By rewriting several traditional literary genres by means of parody, Joan also dismantles rigid genre distinction and, therefore, renders a more complex and creative version of a novel that is inserted in the context of Canadian literature.

In this sense, Joan’s writing is like Atwood’s main narrative, *Lady Oracle*, a criticism of these literary conventions because both problematize not only the Gothic and other literary genres, but also the happy ending of traditional romance. Similar to Joan’s last version of *Stalked by Love*, which is interrupted by her accident with a stalker who finds her in Italy, the main narrative of *Lady Oracle* also has a very open ending in which it is not clear if the protagonist will come back to Toronto to find a resolution to her personal problems. Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* hints that Joan is interested in the stalker, when she says that “I have to admit that there is something about a man in a bandage” (346) which makes the reader think that there might be an alternative ending. Robert Lecker points out that structurally the narrative is, like Joan’s incomplete works,

a failed romance in which the heroine goes through all the motions that should lead to her inevitable release, only to discover that the romance’s

promised return from the dream world never occur . . . The relentless disruption of the romance modes and conventions create, on the other hand, an amusing parody of the genre. (201)

Thus, it might be said that Joan's writing works as a metafictional commentary on literary creation as it mirrors Atwood's own criticism of the themes, characters and structure of the Gothic, the romance, the Victorian poetry, and the pulp fiction. Besides, through the irresolution of the ending, both Atwood's narrative and Joan's aesthetics defy the sense of closure of the plot of these conventional literary genres.

Therefore, the disruptions with the formulas of the characterization of the hero, the heroine, the villainess and even with the conventional happy ending in Joan's parodic works and in the novel itself criticize traditional literary conventions to which Canadian literature has been bound for a long time. As Atwood's writer also adopts and contests, through parody, several literary conventions other than the Gothic, *Lady Oracle* emphasizes the several possibilities for the contemporary Canadian writer to problematize the predominance of British cultural tradition which places Canadian literary production in a derivative position.

The Canadian Painter: Questioning Artistic Conventions

Similar to the way *Lady Oracle* shows the conflicts which writer Joan experiences because of the influence of dominant literary conventions and genres in Canadian literature, *Cat's Eye* also points out the problems which painter Elaine goes through. These problems are a consequence of the predominance of European artistic conventions in Canadian art. Throughout *Cat's Eye*, Elaine learns some of the conventions of European visual art and becomes increasingly critical of the passive assimilation of European tradition in Canadian aesthetics.

In this novel, Atwood also uses parodic devices to reflect on the conventions of the novel of the artist and of European visual art. As shown before, parody is a significant strategy used to connect the present to the past, thus contesting the unacknowledged politics and evasions in literary representation and also in the visual arts (*Politics* 98). The critical continuity and distancing of parody in visual art are used by painter Elaine not only to acknowledge visual conventions, techniques and themes of European art because they are inherently part of the artistic tradition of her culture, but also to question the use of these conventions in Canadian artistic production.

Cat's Eye denounces the notion of Canadian art as derivative, as this view repeats traditional art styles and techniques, privileging, consequently, the position of European visual art seen as original. Atwood shows this concession given to European art when the protagonist attends art classes at the University. Her academic formation consists of the study of European artistic tradition from the medieval period to the analysis of well-known works of the Renaissance. Not even the important Group of Seven is mentioned in her Art and Archeology classes.

Besides, when, in Elaine's classes about the history of art, she finds out that the artifact of her own culture is not viewed as significant as European painting, the protagonist begins to feel insecure and worried about her future as a painter. In her Life Drawing class, for instance, the protagonist is discouraged to create her own works. Elaine's attempts to make her own drawings are undermined by her European professor. As a result, she feels as though her own drawings are a "waste of time" because, as Elaine learns from her Professor, it seems that "[a]rt has been accomplished, elsewhere" and "[a]ll that remains to be done with it is the memory work" (301). In other words, in her classes, Elaine realizes that, for Canadian artists who are believed to have no art and history of their own, the work left to be done is the revision of paintings and drawings by European

painters of the past, most of them male artists. Hutcheon argues that in Elaine's ironic response to the location of art as being "elsewhere," the distancing in time (not now) and place (not in Canada) underlines certain obstacles to an inspiring Canadian artist (*Splitting* 101). By questioning this view of art as having its origin in Europe, the novel critically exposes the difficulty for Canadians to define an aesthetic different from the European artistic tradition.

As Elaine only has access to the techniques and history of European art, she first revisits this tradition in her artistic development. Similar to the way Joan appropriates the Gothic narrative to compose her works in *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye* also shows that painter Elaine feels that she needs to learn and experience the dominant cultural tradition before she questions and critically assimilates it through parody in Canadian art. In her Art and Archeology class, Elaine revisits the Roman and Greek periods. However, the word Classic for her "has come to mean breached-out and broken" (300). Later on, she studies the "reliquaries and elongated saints" of the Mediaeval period and also the "highpoints" of Renaissance art: "Virgin Marys abound: It's as if one enormous Virgin Mary has had a whole bunch of daughters" (309). Elaine's sarcasm here criticizes European artistic conventions of the past: the broken bodies of classic works, the influence of the church in visual arts during the Mediaeval, and the Renaissance period.

Atwood's painter also becomes curious about painting and drawing techniques of the past. Elaine attempts to learn some old techniques such as painting with "egg tempera, the techniques of monks" (355). She also concentrates her research on "the work of Leonardo da Vinci, whose studies of hands and feet and hair and dead people [Elaine] pore[s] over" (355). Dutch paintings also draw Elaine's attention, especially Jan Van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage* (355). Actually, Elaine learns and acquires some of these artistic conventions in her artistic education only to question them afterwards. Further on,

through a critical review and parody of these artistic conventions, some themes, styles and techniques reappear in her artistic works.

Through her own works, the protagonist challenges the representation of saints, of the artist, of landscapes, and of subjectivity in her own perspective: revising and paradoxically contesting the tradition. Again, the use of parody, so recurrent in Canadian art, serves as a powerful strategy for Elaine, as for Joan, to place Canadian cultural art beyond the imitative and passive position in the face of European tradition. Commenting on the different representations of landscape in one of Elaine's works, the fictional critic who organizes her art exhibition says that the artist "takes on the Group of Seven and reconstructs their vision of landscapes in the light of contemporary experiment and postmodern pastiche" (443-44). Elaine's critics seem to be aware of the critical position which the painter takes by reviewing several artistic styles, such as the realist representation of landscape, which the Canadian Group of Seven did not depict in such a disruptive way.

In her painting *Unified Field Theory*, for instance, Elaine parodies the portrayal of Madonna in Renaissance art. The saint reappears, but while the Virgin Mary of Renaissance paintings is portrayed indoors "sitting by the fireplace or in chairs of the period, or by open windows" (309), Elaine paints the Virgin of the Lost Things outdoors in a typical Canadian winter-like landscape. The saint is "positioned above the top railing of the bridge" which is surrounded "by tops of trees, bare of leaves, with a covering of snow on them, as after a heavy moist snowfall" (446). The background also differs from the representations of "clear Italian skies at distance" (309). In Elaine's parody of this Renaissance traditional background, she uses some of her brother's theories of astrophysics and paints "the night sky, as seen through a telescope. Star upon star . . . galaxy upon galaxy: the universe in its incandescence and darkness" (447). In her parodic

version of this tradition, Elaine's use of a typical Canadian landscape and her combination with science and religion redefine the conventional background and portrayals of religious figures in Renaissance visual art.

In her painting *Cat's Eye*, the protagonist also parodies European conventions by revisiting some of the painting techniques present in Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage*. As it is analyzed in Chapter Two, Elaine's *Cat's Eye* problematizes, similarly to Van Eyck's self-conscious work, the traditional notions of perspective and of subjective vision. Nevertheless, Elaine's parodic painting differs from this Dutch work in the technique used to portray the artist reflected on the surface of the pier glass. According to Givner, Elaine's artwork "reflects and distorts *The Arnolfini Marriage*" ("Names" 71). For Jong "[w]hereas van Eyck places himself as artist in the background (although full-figured in the mirror), Elaine puts herself in the foreground, but only revealing half a face" (102). In Elaine's work, she further draws the viewer's attention to the presence of the artist as she paints her self-image in the foreground of the picture, while Van Eyck only acknowledges the role of the artist by placing the artist's image on a mirror in the background.

Considering that Elaine's painting *Cat's Eye* consists of a fragmented self-portrait showing only parts of her face, her work is also different from Van Eyck's picture in the way her self-portrait calls into question traditional representations of the artist's self. If on the one hand, in *Arnolfini Marriage*, the Dutch painter attempts to represent the artist's self-reflection in the mirror as a whole; on the other, in Elaine's view of artistic subjectivity, the half face which she portrays as her self-representation appears to symbolize the problematic concept of artistic identity, which is, for her, distorted and fragmented. Moreover, this fragmentation of artistic subjectivity also seems to parallel Elaine's sense of location. Similar to the distorting pier glass present in Elaine's *Cat's Eye*, for the protagonist, the city of Toronto also "has the power; like a mirror that shows you

only the ruined half of your face” (449). As the painter’s self-image reflected in the unconventional mirror of her art, Canada is also represented through the way Toronto, like her own paintings, reflects the ruined part of her self.

In Elaine’s *Three Muses*, “[t]he arrangement of the figures recalls that of classical Graces” (445), a reference to the graces present in Antonio Canova’s sculpture *Three Muses* (Fig 6). Canova portrays the three graces of Greek mythology, offering their gifts to their goddess. Nonetheless, in her painting, Elaine’s three muses present the gifts “to someone who sits or stands outside the painting” (445), using a contemporary technique that acknowledges and highlights the important participation of the viewer. Moreover, although Elaine knows that “all Muses are supposed to be female” (444), one of her graces is the representation of Mr. Banerji, her father’s Indian student. In this painting, therefore, she infringes the conventional representation of the classical graces, who are women.

Elaine’s parodic version of the classical graces also emphasizes the multiplicity of cultures in Canada. It represents three immigrants who she identifies with: her Jewish neighbor, Mrs. Finestein, who probably has “death camp ashes [blowing] through [her] head . . . in those years after the war”; Mr Banerji, the Indian student who “probably could not walk down a street . . . without dead, of a shove or some word whispered or shouted”; and her school teacher, Miss Stuart, who “was in exile, from blundered Scotland” (445). According to Kirtz, Elaine shows that “they are also, each in a different way, displaced persons, here brought from the margins to the very center standing in for the great cliché-images of Western art, the classical Graces” (70). In other words, when the painter represents these immigrants located in the center of her painting, symbolically taking them from the peripheral position to the foreground, she celebrates this sense of multiplicity present in Canada. However, as Elaine’s description of these three foreign characters implies, the painter also denounces the marginal position in which immigrants are placed

in Canadian society. Thus, in this painting, by parodying the neo-classic graces through the representation of immigrants, Elaine emphasizes the presence of multiculturalism in the construction of her personal surroundings, especially of Canadian culture.

Even though Elaine is of Canadian descent, she attempts to demystify the notion of unity in Canadian society as she represents the members of her community and the cultural mosaic she experiences in the city of Toronto. In this sense, in *Cat's Eye*, more so than in *Lady Oracle*, Atwood openly reflects on what it means to be Canadian. This narrative seems to show that to read Canadian literature is, according to Hutcheon, "to recognize that literature depends on the whole culture, of history and social traditions, without reducing diversity of ethno-cultural enclaves" (Introduction 5). Elaine's visual art and Atwood's literature recognize and celebrate the multiplicity of Canadian culture, be it through the parody of several artistic techniques and conventions in the protagonist's paintings or through the focus on the depiction of characters' cultural diversity.

By parodying literary and artistic conventions through Joan's challenging novels and Elaine's critical view of art, *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* both question, in different terms, the dominant literary traditions and artistic conventions in Canadian cultural representations. While in *Lady Oracle* Joan critically rewrites traditional literary conventions and genres in her novels and poems, dismantling, as a result, genre distinctions in literature, in *Cat's Eye*, Elaine also questions, through parody, several artistic styles and themes, contesting the presence of a derivative tradition in the cultural production of her country and emphasizing the multicultural disposition in Canada. By focusing on a plurality of literary and artistic styles, both women artists seem to show the importance for contemporary Canadian writers and painters to problematize the predominance of European cultural tradition which undervalues Canadian literature and art. Through the protagonists' revision of literary and artistic conventions of the past, both

novels show that Canadian literature and visual art may adopt some of the European conventions, but only if Canadian artists critically revisit and recreate visual art and literary works in their own perspective, which is inevitably associated with their locus of enunciation.

CHAPTER 4

Atwood's Portraits of the Artist as a Woman

Some people think a woman's novel is anything without politics in it. Some think it's anything about relationships. . . . Some think it's anything that doesn't give you a broad panoramic view of our exciting time. Me, well, I just want something you leave on the coffee table and not be too worried if the kids get into it.

(Atwood, *Murder in the Dark* 45)

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven way as violently as from their bodies.

(Cixous 161)

Revisiting Women's Subjectivity in Fiction

As pointed out in the previous chapter, *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* discuss the process of literary and artistic production showing some of the tensions which Canadian artists face. However, as I show, Joan's literature and Elaine's art also reflect on the experience of these protagonists, underlining the political implications of their being women artists. According to Hutcheon, "Canadians and women share certain conditions of marginality" and "strategies of resistance" (Hutcheon, *Splitting* 110). Similarly, Susan Swan, a Canadian contemporary writer, also sees some similarities in the marginal conditions of women and Canadians. As the narrator of Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* puts it, "to be from the Canadas is to feel as women feel—cut off from the base of power" (274). Furthermore, as some critics claim, Canadian women writers are often repressed by Euro-centric literary and artistic traditions but also resist, according to Hutcheon, "the monologic singleness and masterful 'Universe' that so often characterize the discourse of the cultural dominants" (*Splitting* 110).

In this sense, Atwood is a representative Canadian woman writer who often also compares the powerless status of Canada to that of women (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 138), pointing out the marginal situation which Canadian women need to overcome. For Hutcheon, being “both a woman and Canadian, [Atwood] protests any tendency toward easy passivity and naivety” and “refuses to allow either Canadians or women to deny their complicity in the power structures that may subject them” (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 12). As can be seen, Atwood expresses preoccupation not only with the way Canadians question their supposed marginal status in mainstream culture but also with the way Canadian women contest repression with which they have to deal in their own culture.

In Atwood’s fiction, the literary and artistic developments of the two protagonists reveal that Joan and Elaine are inserted in a cultural tradition in which Canadian women artists are even more repressed because they are women. Unlike other Canadians engaged in creative production, Canadian women artists need to question literary and artistic traditions which are rooted in patriarchal ideologies. According to Hutcheon, the dominant tradition of Canadian culture is still perceived as male-centric (*Splitting* 14). Canadian women writers, such as Atwood, often express, through fiction, the difficulties which women, especially women artists, experience to challenge this male-centric society.

The narrator of Atwood’s short story “Women’s Novels” draws our attention to women’s literary production, questioning, especially, the belief that some critics have in the inferiority of women’s writing without taking into consideration the politics involved in this situation. In this story, the narrator’s comment that “a woman’s novel is anything without politics in it” (*Murder* 45) becomes ironic when one reads Atwood’s own novels, which, on the contrary, portray social and other personal tensions which women experience in their lives. Atwood’s preoccupation with women’s subjectivity gains another political dimension if one takes into account the feminist discussion about the importance

of the representation of women in fiction. Writing about women in her fictional works, Atwood seems to follow what Cixous claims in the article “The Laugh of the Medusa,” a passage of which is quoted in the epigraph that opens this chapter: “Woman must write her self” (161). Cixous emphasizes that women writers should write about themselves and other women because by bringing women to writing, they can contest the patriarchal ideology which have driven women writers away from literary tradition for a long time.

In the case of Atwood’s novels of the artist, the depictions of women also draw our attention to the construction of women’s subjectivities which is significantly related to their engagement with literary productions. These narratives are often centered on the personal and professional development of a woman writer. For example, in the short story “Lives of Poets” from *Dancing Girls*, Atwood focuses on Julia, a woman poet. In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood’s most recent novel of the artist, she portrays a novelist, Iris, who also depicts, in her own text, the experience of another woman writer. In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood not only brings the figure of a woman to her fiction, as Cixous advises, but also portrays the protagonist as a critical writer who learns to see the political implications of the representation of women in literature.

Furthermore, Atwood’s novels of the artist seem to ponder upon the politics that are expressed in the representations of women not only in literary tradition but also in visual art, as it is the case of the novels *Surfacing* and *Cat’s Eye*. Atwood represents an illustrator of children’s book in the novel *Surfacing*. In *Cat’s Eye*, painter Elaine seems to be even more critical of the process of representation of women and their bodies in artistic tradition. Thus, representing women in these novels of the woman artist and discussing what lies beneath the depiction of women in literary and artistic works, Atwood’s fiction questions the traditional role of women in writing and art.

This chapter addresses the way women are represented in literature and art with a

focus on how, in *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, the protagonists challenge traditional literary and visual representations of women. Furthermore, by emphasizing the relation between these women and the creative process, be it textual or visual, both novels also revisit a literary tradition in which the female artists undergo a process of development through what has been described as the novel of the woman artist. As Atwood's novels of the artist are concerned with women's experience with literature and art, I also show how *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* question traditional notions of femininity based on an ideology which restricts women from literary and artistic productions.

To understand how and why Atwood's fiction brings to the fore the discussion about the depictions of women and the relation between women and the creative process, it is significant to examine the critique of the representations of women in traditional literature and art and also in women's works. Although most of the theories used in this chapter investigate the representation of women in fiction, they will contribute to the understanding of the way women artists similarly reflect on women's subjectivities through visual art, such as what happens to Atwood's fictional painter in *Cat's Eye*.

It can be argued that the focus on the representation of female figures in women's literary and artistic works can be related to the political necessity to discuss the issue of women's subjectivities. As contemporary feminist theorists point out, the analysis of the construction of women's subjectivity is noteworthy in women's literary and artistic productions. According to Rita Felski, in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, the question of subjectivity is introduced as a central point in the "consideration of the social meanings and functions of feminist literature" (51).

The emphasis on different ways of viewing subjectivity in women's works is often seen as an attempt to criticize predefinitions of femininity in traditional literature and art of the past. According to Felski, in women's fiction, a concern about subjectivity is turned

into a priority because women's "subordinative position has traditionally manifested itself in an acquiescence to male demands and an internalization of a cultural tradition that defines the feminine as trivial and inferior" (76). While women are traditionally seen in subjugated positions, men are viewed as subjects in the context of a patriarchal ideology. The Canadian feminist critic Barbara Godard affirms that one of the problems of this cultural tradition is that "if Man as subject undertakes the work of civilization, creating languages, cultures, machines while assigning to the non-I the terms of woman, the emotions, the body principle, the 'nothingness' . . . how can a woman speak or write?"(14). Being assigned an inferior position in comparison to their male counterparts, women have traditionally be seen as mere objects and, thus, could not play an active role in society, such as expressing their minds through speaking and writing.

The literature and art influenced by patriarchal ideology have always represented women in a restricted way by disregarding the complexity of women's subjectivity. Very often, these literary and artistic representations function as a mirror which imprisons the image of women in a flat mirror surface, the looking glass. In "The Queen's Looking Glass," Gilbert and Gubar analyze representations of women in literature before the twentieth century, using precisely this metaphor of the mirror. In traditional literature and art, women were reduced to "characters and images imprisoned in male texts" (12), as if these female figures were symbolically captured within the frames of a looking glass. For the critics above, women enclosed in these texts, glyphs and graphics are sentenced: "fated" and "jailed" ("Queen's" 13). Once she becomes "the prisoner of the mirror/text's image," this woman "has no voice to speak" (Gilbert and Gubar, "Queen's" 16).

In visual art, for instance, one of the works that best illustrates the representation of women imprisoned in a flat mirror image is Diego Velázquez's *Venus at Her Mirror* (Fig. 3). In this painting, Velázquez portrays the goddess Venus looking at herself in the flat

mirror which is carried by a cherub. The female figure is not only framed in the canvas of the painting but also in a flat mirror which reflects her face.

Likewise, in Victorian literature, the poem “The Lady of Shalott,” by Lord Tennyson also illustrates well the representations of a woman as framed and, thus, limited in the mirror which stands for the literary tradition influenced by the patriarchal view of the time. In this poem, the female figure is imprisoned in a tower in the island of Shalott near Camelot. This woman is involved with creative production through her songs, which people can hear, and through the “magic web with colors gay,” which she constantly weaves (37-38). She is, however, condemned to see the world through the reflections of a mirror because “[a] curse is on her if she stay/ To look down to Camelot” (Tennyson 40-41). When Tennyson’s female figure becomes “half sick of shadows” (71) and attempts to trespass the limited worldview imposed by this mirror to look directly at Sir Lancelot, with whom she falls in love, “[t]he mirror cracked from side to side” (115) and the Lady of Shalott is penalized with death. Her imprisonment and punishment, thus, express the social and personal constraints imposed on women by the patriarchal ideology of Victorian society. The poem also portrays a woman whose artistic creativity is controlled once the Lady of Shalott can only weave what she sees reflected in the mirror. Besides, according to Givner, the Lady of Shalott becomes involved in an endless process which never creates a product: “weaving ‘by night and day’ . . . the Lady of Shalott is entrapped in an infinitive process” (par. 11). Her attempt to transgress personal and artistic limitations—symbolized by her looking glass—only brings about this character’s death. Condemning this woman to produce her art under the imposition of the mirror, in this poem, Tennyson seems to portray the artistic limitations of women at the time.

Some artists also represented, in painting, the female figure of Lord Tennyson’s poem. Charles Robinson’s and William Hunt’s representations (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5), for

instance, depict the Lady of Shalott and the lack of freedom which she experiences in Tennyson's poem. In Robinson's artwork, the painter represents the woman's limitations through the threads encircling her. Robinson also paints the mirror which imposes a restricted view of reality on the Lady of Shalott. Likewise, Hunt's work also expresses this woman's lack of freedom through the webs which surround her. In this case, the Lady of Shalott's imprisonment is also emphasized through the small room of the tower in which she is confined. Both images represent a woman artist who is controlled by the confinement and impositions of Victorian society.

As the examples discussed above show, in this cultural tradition, women are not allowed to express their feelings and creativity through artistic creation. The representations of women by male writers and artists expose the view of femininity which restricts women's subjectivity, on a personal level, by representing them as passive characters and, on a social level, by showing their impossibility of producing literature and art.

Conversely, women's art and fiction have attempted to question this predefined concept of representation. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that, very often, when women artists question patriarchal ideology, they do not aim at creating a duality between men and women since, for contemporary feminist critics, "the polarization of masculine and feminine spheres . . . is reductive and ultimately counterproductive" (Felski 58). Their purpose is often to contest those representations of women and definitions of the feminine based on a patriarchal ideology. In Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of the way women writers question patriarchal views of subjectivity, in "The Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship," the critics claim that a woman artist's struggle "is not a fight against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*" (292).

In order to create their own artistic representations, women artists, therefore, need to challenge those negative images and restrictive readings of their subjectivities perpetuated by the patriarchal ideology. According to Gilbert and Gubar, authored by these male authors and “killed into a ‘perfect’ image of herself, the woman writer’s self-contemplation may be said to have begun with a searching glance into the mirror of the male inscribed literary text” (“Queen’s” 15). Yet, as the works analyzed above illustrate, the only image which these women artists could see was the figure of the passive woman framed in the mirror of male artists. Although the concept of women’s subjectivity has been, for a long time, sustained by these negative representations of women in literary and artistic tradition, it does not mean that the female subject is powerless to modify that limiting structure.

Feminist theories emphasize that it is possible to question traditional representations of women’s subjectivities, which have been predefined and imposed by men’s discourses. Based on the possibility of agency, feminist theories suggest that women may have the opportunity to comprehend and express their selves beyond the limited concept of women’s subjectivity created by the patriarchal ideology. Regarding the concept of agency, Felski explains that

the relationship between structures and agency is dynamic, not static; human beings do not simply reproduce existing structures in the process of action and communication, but in turn modify those structures even as they are shaped by them . . . This notion of the duality of structure makes it possible to move away from a conceptual model which counterposes linguistic, cultural, and social structures, understood as purely forces, against a pre-given subject (55-56).

When one no longer sees language, culture or society as a static structure, the subject gains

freedom as an agent. Consequently, human beings, acting within the very discourse that limits them, can also “modify those structures through the reflexive monitoring of their actions” (Felski 57). This view of social, ideological and cultural structures as more open to several degrees of modification promotes a different perception of discourse which is “potentially and more productive from a standpoint of a feminist politics” (Felski 65). Likewise, Hutcheon emphasizes the importance of agency in feminist theories when she states that “[t]he many feminist social agendas demand a theory of agency” (*Politics* 22).

The contribution that the concept of agency brings to feminist theories is that seeing women also as agents and, thus, active subjects, renders them the freedom to challenge—and perhaps modify—the view of women’s subjectivity that places them in the positions of submissive and inferior subjects in patriarchal discourses. Along these lines, Cixous emphasizes the necessity of women, being agents and subjects, to question the notion of subjectivity which was designated for them in traditional literature. Cixous claims that writing themselves “will allow [women] to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in [their] history” (164).

In fact, through this critical writing, women can challenge the negative representation not only of women’s subjectivities but also of their bodies and, therefore, “return to the body which has been more than confiscated from [them], which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display, the ailing or dead figure” (Cixous 165). Cixous argues that in the literary representations of the female body created by men, women are “reduced to being a servant of the militant male, his shadow” (165). For the critic above, women writers should revise the negative images which represented the notion of femininity of the past, rewriting, in a more critical way, a less limited and more complex view of subjectivity.

This critique of traditional representations of women was extremely necessary

when women began to create their own literary and artistic tradition in the past. Gilbert and Gubar argue that literary representations before the nineteenth century “deny [women] the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that . . . imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen” (“Queen’s” 14). When women were not allowed to be part of the artistic tradition which their counterparts dominated for a long time, they were also refused the opportunity of contesting the negative depictions created by patriarchal society and represented in the literature and art of the time. In order to dispute those views of femininity, women also had to struggle to have literary and artistic autonomy. Nevertheless, such a task was a real challenge for women writer and artists. After analyzing some representations of women similar to the one observed in Tennyson’s poem, Gilbert and Gubar claim that “it is no wonder that women have historically hesitated to attempt the pen” (“Queen’s” 15). As the representations of the Lady of Shalott illustrate, the control of women’s creativity seems to be one of the ways through which the literary and cultural traditions of the past prevented women from expressing their selves in ways other than their male counterparts’ viewpoint. Adding to women artists’ frustration for not being engaged in literary and artistic creation, these images and characters also became a means of restraining women’s personal and artistic experience.

For Gilbert and Gubar, only after women writers came to terms with and transcended the images and representations that were generated for them, could they journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy (Gilbert and Gubar, “Queen’s” 16-17). The journey through this looking glass symbolizes the way “toward the woman trapped on the other side of the mirror/text” (16)—the problematic image of femininity which women writers needed to dismantle. For women, literary and artistic autonomy is intrinsically related to the freedom which they gain to express alternative possibilities of subjectivities because when “a woman is denied the autonomy—subjectivity—that the pen

represents, she is not only excluded from culture . . . but she also becomes herself an embodiment of just those extremes of mysterious and intransigent Otherness” (Gilbert and Gubar, “Queen’s” 19). In other words, women only became autonomous to provide, in their words, a different perception of who they are—as subjects rather than objects—when they decided to shatter those traditional literary and artistic images which defined them for a long time.

Discouraging women from being part of the creative process also perpetuated the belief that the relation between womanhood and artistic vocation was unnatural, once artistic fulfillment was seen as a privilege which only men could have. In this traditional view, while men were encouraged to express their selves through literature and art, women, on the other hand, were not allowed to be engaged in literary and artistic production. This opposition between womanhood and literary and artistic creation is represented, according to Gilbert and Gubar, by the extreme images of the angel and the monster in literature (“Queen’s” 17)—a reference to Virginia Woolf’s famous argument in *A Room of One’s Own* and “Professions for Women.” In Woolf’s “Professions for Women,” the narrator explains her struggle between her desire to be a writer and to conform to the ideal of femininity, symbolized by the angel, an allusion to Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House,” which reinforces the representation of women as submissive. Gilbert and Gubar agree that, while the angel refers to the “aesthetic ideal through which [women] themselves have been ‘killed’ into art,” the monster stands for the opposite (Gilbert and Gubar, “Queen’s” 17). The monster represents the woman who does not conform to the patterns of femininity and who often dedicates her life to some profession such as literature and art—a position which is considered even more unnatural in this patriarchal view. The figure of a woman artist was seen as unfavorable because she represents a threat, a subject who can transgress the limitations of patriarchal society,

unlike the passive image of the angel that embodies the ideals of femininity.

In fiction that depicts a woman artist, these opposite images create a difficult situation for the female character because what the patriarchal society sees as feminine—the image of the subjugated woman—discourages women from being creative and, similarly, the negative image of the woman artist—the monster or the witch who does not accept social subjugation—also annihilates the possibility of this artist’s social insertion once she does not fit the model of femininity. Both roles, seen in the patriarchal ideology, are incompatible. As a result, the woman in the novel of the artist, “must reject the image of woman as passive, weak, selfless, and unthinking *or* accept her unwomanliness if she actively and selfishly seeks experience, knowledge and pleasure” (Stewart 14, emphasis added)—a problematic choice for the female character who wants to be woman and artist in her own terms.

In order to be part of the literary and artistic tradition, women have to contest this dualistic view which defined women artists, creating an endless tension between art and womanhood. According to Gilbert and Gubar, women must destroy the image of the angel (“Queen’s” 17). Similarly, realizing the tension between these two negative definitions, Woolf’s narrator states that, in order to write, the woman writer must fight a phantom, the angel in the house who comes between her and her own writing (“Professions” 2476). On the other hand, women must also destroy the extreme image of the monster, the negative reference to the woman artist which also kills female creativity, according to Gilbert and Gubar (“Queen’s” 17). Likewise, Grace Stewart claims that, to represent themselves beyond these dualistic images of the angel and the monster, the artist depicted in fiction “must defy the cultural definitions of artist or of woman if she is to remain artist and woman” (14).

However, some fictional representations of woman as an artist challenged the belief

that women were not supposed to be part of literary and artistic traditions. For example, Elizabeth B. Browning's poem *Aurora Leigh* shows the dilemmas which women involved with art or literature need to go through. In this poem, Browning represents an aspiring woman poet, Aurora, who attempts to transgress the restrictions imposed on women artists in the nineteenth century. When Aurora's cousin finds out her experiments in writing poems, he says that her poetry "has witchcraft in't" and later calls her a witch (2.78-9) because he echoes the view of society that sees creative women as unnatural and monstrous. Aurora, as other women artists, experiences this tension between womanhood and artistry:

I stood upon the brink of twenty years,
 And looked before and after, as I stood
 Woman and artist,—either incomplete,
 Both credulous of completion. . . . (2.1-4)

Questioning a patriarchal view of the time, Aurora struggles to be a fulfilled woman and also an artist. Focusing on a female character who attempts to transgress the limitations imposed on women, the poem, therefore, challenges the belief that women could not be writers or artists in nineteenth-century society.

In *Writing beyond the Ending*, Rachael Duplessis claims that, in several nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's fiction in which the protagonist is a woman artist, there is an attempt to negotiate the designated role of femininity and the possibility of artistic vocation (84). Similarly, Stewart argues that this dilemma between artistic fulfillment and womanhood, and between art and life "form a vital part of the novel of the artist as a heroine" (15). Nevertheless, most nineteenth-century women's representations of female artists emphasize less the artistic genius than the woman (Duplessis 87). Fictional women artists often reject artistic vocation favoring the traditional concepts of femininity because

nineteenth-century fiction is generally based on a patriarchal love plot and, therefore, represents women's dependence on love and maternity. This conventional plot in nineteenth-century novels of the artist, according to Duplessis, makes "strong demands for conformity to exactly interpreted feminine roles" (91). In other words, in these novels, the woman artist often conforms to femininity and tends to refuse artistic vocation because of the social limitations of the time. In some of these novels, however, women writers begin to challenge the conventional narrative and ideology of the time by "writing beyond the ending" of the heterosexual love plot, which favors the image of a woman as an angel (Duplessis 91). By writing beyond the ending, these writers attempt to break with the dualism in which the fictional women artists were often caught.

If in the nineteenth-century fiction by women, writers represent a fictional woman artist or writer, such as Aurora, who still struggles to find a balance between ideal womanhood and artistic vocation, in the twentieth century, women writers and artists become even more critical of that traditional belief. Expressing this critical view of women's literary and artistic experience, Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* challenge the notion of women's artistic fulfillment based on a patriarchal tradition that makes the subject choose between the idealized view of womanhood and the unconventional role of the artist. Both protagonists experience this tension between art and life but, as I shall show, they problematize this traditional division between artistic fulfillment and the social role of women. Furthermore, as Joan creates several female characters in her texts and Elaine represents the image of women and their bodies in her art, Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* also revisit and contest the negative definitions of women's representations in patriarchal tradition.

Joan: Writing Women beyond the Ending

As discussed in the previous chapter, in *Lady Oracle*, Atwood critically rewrites British literary traditions of the past through the protagonist's literary experiments, moving from the period when Joan assimilates some literary conventions to the moment when she eventually parodies these traditions. In this narrative, Atwood also contests Victorian and Gothic literary traditions as Joan's works critically revisit stereotypical images of women and the negative notions of femininity which the Gothic and Victorian heroines often represent.

When Joan begins to use the conventions and structures of the Gothic literary tradition, her first heroines are depicted as "apprehensive maidens in modified nightgowns, hair streaming in the wind, eyes bulging like those of a goiter victim" (31). Joan represents in her fiction the typical female figure of this literary tradition: the submissive "damsel in distress" and the victim of patriarchal society. At this moment, Joan's Gothic heroines, portrayed as beautiful and virgin women, also contribute to reinforce the ideal notion of femininity with which her readers identify. In fact, Joan creates her heroines as "mere stand-ins: their features [are] never clearly defined, their faces [are] putty which each reader could reshape into her own, adding a little beauty" (32). From Joan's very first Costume Gothic, *The Lord of Chesney Chase* to fragments of her last narrative, *Stalked by Love*, Joan uses these idealized and negative representations of women which are common in the Gothic literary tradition. At first, this fictional writer seems to merely reproduce the stereotyped image of women in this literary tradition, however, Joan provides a revision of this model, challenging the way women's representations are constructed, through her own version of the Gothic heroine later.

In *Escape from Love*, Joan revisits the typical plot which victimizes the heroine: the woman who attempts to escape the dangers of sexuality and love in order to preserve her

purity. Her character Samantha is “[a]lone, weak and unprotected” (163) and flees “from the illicit attention of Sir Edmund DeVere” because “[he] had just tried to take advantage of her” (161). When she portrays Samantha as a woman who tries to ignore her own desires for the hero, Joan creates a character that is, furthermore, repressed sexually, emphasizing the ideal view of femininity in the Gothic literary tradition. Likewise, in Joan’s *Stalked by Love*, heroine Charlotte promises her mother that she will always tell the truth, be pure, circumspect and obedient (125). Both Charlotte’s and Samantha’s depictions as stereotyped Gothic heroines reveal the patriarchal view of womanhood, which is symbolized by “the angel in the house” in Victorian society. According to McKinstry, “the Victorian Angel in the House becomes the Gothic heroine in the haunted mansion, both fighting to protect the sexuality that is the key to the power, romance, and success;” as a consequence, “to insure female chastity, women are imprisoned morally, socially, and sexually” (59). Joan’s representations of the Gothic heroine, thus, show that, in the patriarchal ideology expressed in this literary tradition, women’s personal success depends also on the control of their sexuality.

Analyzing the formation of the woman artist in this novel, Campello divides Joan’s writing into three different parts. In the first part, to which Joan’s first works belong, Joan reproduces a literary tradition which she learns following the masculine logic—taught by the Polish Count—in the elaboration of her protagonists (128). Campello claims that Joan’s mimesis can be seen as a cult to social-historical, economical, cultural and esthetical patterns which enclose women in the figurative labyrinth of the Gothic romance (128). In this sense, the labyrinth stands for the limitations of the plot of the Gothic tradition, in which the female character is repressed throughout the narrative, similarly to what Joan does to her heroines Samantha and Charlotte.

Seeing Joan’s first narratives as a representation of this literary tradition also means

that the writer adopts the notion of literature as the mirror—a significant metaphor for traditional literary and artistic representations of women, as it is discussed beforehand—which frames women in the image of these passive heroines. Through Joan’s writing experience, “Atwood shows that the mirror reflects more truly a culture where women are objectified and packaged for the marriage market” (Bromberg 13). In the first stage of her writing experience, Joan’s narratives function as the mirror of traditional literature which portrays women in the conventional Gothic plot, consequently, endorsing the negative notions of femininity. If Joan’s narrative only mirrored the Gothic formula, as McKinstry also claims (62), the writer would be unable to challenge the construction of women’s subjectivity in patriarchal ideology.

However, Joan is eager to make some experiments with her writing when she is in England, living with Paul, the Polish Count who composes nursery fiction and initiates the protagonist into writing. Tired of the Gothic heroine, Joan says that she wants to write something more modern, as for instance, a plot set in the twenties. Nevertheless, Paul advises her saying that it will not sell if the writer raises these women’s skirt and cut their hair because he believes that readers “prefer it if the woman should retain her mystery” (165). Paul wants Joan to continue depicting these Gothic heroines as mysterious and submissive characters, following the traditional view of the representations of women in literature. Only when the protagonist adopts parody to question the literary traditions which predominate in her fiction, does she begin to be critical of her idealized heroines. Campello argues that Joan’s critical experiments with the Gothic tradition refer to the second part of Joan’s writing development, in which Joan is preparing herself to experience a writing process that allows her heroines to gain consciousness in relation to their roles as women (128). Joan’s parodic experiments with the literary tradition of the past, be it the Gothic narrative or Victorian poetry, are extremely important to promote

change in Joan's depiction of women in her final works.

The composition of her *Love, My Ransom* renders Joan material for the creation of her *Lady Oracle*, one of the most important experiments which begin to shift her depiction of women. In *Love, My Ransom*, after Penelope is forced to look at the mirror, her reflection disappears and "*further into the mirror she [goes], and further, till she seem[s] to be walking on the other side of the glass*" (218). Penelope's imprisonment in the mirror seems to be a reference to Tennyson's poem, "The Lady of Shalott." Like the Lady of Shalott, Penelope also becomes imprisoned in a mirror. There are also some similarities between the woman portrayed in Joan's *Lady Oracle* and the Lady of Shalott. The female figure whom Joan sees in the reflection of the mirror is singing and "*standing in the prow*" and "*voyaging... in the death boat*" (221) and "*float[ing] down the river singing her last song*" (225), like the Lady of Shalott. Apparently, because of the similarities between *Lady Oracle* and Tennyson's stereotyped woman, Joan's fiction seems to work like a mirror which frames the subjectivity of her female character.

Nonetheless, the more we understand the character *Lady Oracle*, the better we see how Joan's text becomes more critical of the traditional representations of women in literature. *Lady Oracle* is a female figure who is more complex than Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*, Joan's *Penelope*, and all the other heroines the protagonist creates before composing her book *Lady Oracle*. Joan's book of poems differs from Tennyson's in the way that she disrupts the representation of women in Victorian literature. Different from Tennyson's representation of the *Lady of Shalott* whose personality and creativity are restrained by the flat mirror, Joan's heroine is more powerful because she is, above all, threatening. As shown in the poem, this woman "*must be/ obeyed forever*" (225) and "*her tears are the death you fear*" (221). Besides, this woman is also compared to a queen who "*[s]its on the iron throne*" (225), which emphasizes her power and defiance. Furthermore,

unlike the simplistic characterization of the heroines of this literary tradition, Joan constructs a complex woman who carries multiple personalities, once, in her poem, *Lady Oracle*

is one and three

The dark lady

the redgold lady

The blank lady

oracle. (225)

Lady Oracle's power and complexity are also significant to help us understand the shift which occurs in Joan's own writing. Campello argues that this multifaceted image of *Lady Oracle* catalyzes Joan's selves and also symbolizes her powerful writing (142). In other words, like her new heroine, Joan's writing is not seen as simplistic and imitative anymore. It becomes a critical mode of representation, in which Joan revisits, parodies and, thus, challenges the formulas of Victorian and Gothic literature.

If one considers that the protagonist's *Lady Oracle* also alludes to another nineteenth-century literary representation of women, Rider Haggard's *She*, Joan's depictions of women become even more critical of the patriarchal tradition which Victorian literature stands for. According to Rao, in Joan's work, "[t]he characterization of its 'dark lady,' and of her unhappy power, resembles that of the queen of the fantastic kingdom in Rider Haggard's *She*" (135). Rao also argues that Haggard's and Tennyson's representations of women are "emblematic figures in the nineteenth-century iconography of women" (135). Haggard's character "embodies a myth of ruling womanhood," whereas, "the Lady of Shalott proposes a Victorian ideal of feminine self-renunciation" (Rao 135). In this sense, the power of Joan's heroine also refers to an unconventional nineteenth-century representation of womanhood which condemns the ideal notion of femininity.

By questioning negative depictions of women in Joan's parodic experiments, Atwood also disrupts the frames which enclose the female character; that is, Atwood

breaks the static mirror of traditional literature which imprisons women's subjectivities. Pamela Bromberg claims that the plot of *Lady Oracle* "subvert[s] patriarchal literary conventions and [its] language deconstructs traditional specular metaphors" (14). For the critic above, Atwood also recognizes the dominance of the male gaze over the female image in the romantic quest plot (14). Therefore, Joan "resist[s] entrapment and objectification in the nineteenth-century plot of romantic desire" (Bromberg 23). Likewise, Jessie Givner argues that Atwood's text introduces "loose ends which escape frames and other structures of enclosure ("Mirror" par. 3). When Atwood transforms "the closed, static mirror into an open one, she disrupts the conventional mirror image which recurs in so many literary . . . works" (Givner, "Mirror" par. 4) and which Victorian and Gothic literatures perpetuate. By using open and complex plots in Joan's later texts, Atwood somewhat frees Joan to use alternative possibilities of representing women's subjectivity.

Through this critical review of women's representations, Atwood's *Lady Oracle* also challenges the conventions of the novel of the artist depicted as a woman. In this narrative, Joan also seems divided between artistic fulfillment, represented traditionally through the image of the witch, and designated womanhood, represented in the reference to the angel in the house. When Joan arrives in the traditional small town of Terremoto, people begin to see her as a strange woman. In fact, in her "new" life, Joan does not fit the ideal view of femininity in this place. Joan is seen as an unconventional woman because she does not bring her husband with her. Besides, she disguises her attractive physical appearance which conformed to the ideal view of beauty when she cuts her long red hair and covers her green eyes with dark glasses. Later, people begin to see Joan as a threatening figure once they find out that she buried the clothes used to fake her death in Canada. Seeing these signs of independence and free will, the people of this small town come to the conclusion that Joan is a witch. After the Italian landlord tells the protagonist

about people's fears, Joan realizes that her mother may have named her after Joan of Arc thinking beforehand that "[w]omen like these were accused of witchcraft, they were roped to the stake, they gave a lovely light" (337). The narrative signals the belief that Joan is, in fact, a powerful figure who can recreate herself just like she does with the heroines in her fiction. Nevertheless, Joan also denounces the punishment which these women receive when they, like Joan of Arc, dare to transgress the constraints of society.

The use of the image of the witch in this episode is not a coincidence in the novel. Associated to women's creativity, the figures of a witch and of a monster stand for unnatural women who attempted to go beyond the personal and literary conventions in patriarchal society, as I discuss beforehand. In *Lady Oracle*, this image represents Joan's unconventional behavior in the traditional town of Terremoto. Furthermore, because Joan also assumes the role of a writer during her stay in this town, the image of the witch is also a reference to her artistic identity. Like the poet Aurora and other fictional women artists in the past who have to choose between being the angel or the monster, Joan, also experiences this tension in the present day time. The writer feels as though she "was two people at once, with two sets of identification paper, two back accounts, two different groups of people who believed [she] existed" (212). Joan is first the housewife, the angel, represented through her identity as Joan Foster. She knows that she is Joan Foster, "there was no doubt about that; people called [her] by that name and [she] had authentic documents to prove it. But [she] [is] also Louisa K. Delacourt" (212). According to Rao, "Joan Foster keeps her secret identity as Louisa K. Delacourt" since "[s]he is ashamed to admit that she makes a living by writing popular fiction" which "reinforces Joan's self-division and highlights her duplicity" (136).

The novel not only shows the tension which women writers experience because of the conflict between the ideals of femininity and artistic vocation, but it also contests the

opposition between these two roles. To question the problematic definition which traditionally stands for women writers' subjectivity in the novels of the artist before the twentieth century, Joan needs to overcome her position, torn between the images of the witch which her artistic side represents and of the angel which her past as a traditional housewife echoes. After recollecting some events of her "previous" life, Joan "now could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many" (245). The protagonist realizes that, as a woman artist, her possibilities of subjectivity are more complex and multiple than the dualistic images—the ideal notion of femininity and the threatening woman writer—created by patriarchal ideology. As a consequence, *Lady Oracle* disrupts the negative images used to define women writers' subjectivities.

Furthermore, the ending of the narrative that the protagonist writes in the town of Terremoto, *Stalked by Love*, also helps Joan question these traditional ways of representing women and women writers. In this work, she reflects on the opposition between the angel and the monster as literary depictions of women. These oppositions are clear in Joan's representations of the heroine and the villainess. While Charlotte smells of "*faintly stale lavender*," Felicia has an odor of "*spring decay . . . a smell like the edges of swamps*" (319). Redmond prefers Charlotte's innocence than Felicia's extravagance and "figure that spread like crabgrass, hair that spread like fire," and "mind that spread like cancer or public lice" (319). Unlike the ideal and passive image of femininity which Charlotte stands for, Felicia is portrayed as an unromantic and independent woman, which is emphasized by the depiction of her decaying smell and her extravagant behavior. Besides, Felicia differs from the ideal view of womanhood once she is portrayed with a cancerous mind, making her a threatening woman to her husband Redmond. Rao claims that "Felicia's portrayal" and her rebellion "against the repression of sexuality" culminate in "the unromantic and male-threatening image of her mind" (139). As an independent woman, a

notion that is underlined by her loose red hair, Felicia, therefore, differs from the conventional representation of women in the Gothic tradition just like Joan's character Lady Oracle opposes the Victorian ideal of femininity. In fact, Felicia's unconventional portrayal and attitudes also fit into the description of the monstrous villainess, a clear reference to Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*.

Moreover, Felicia stands for Joan's artistic personality. Joan and Felicia both transgress the ideal notions of femininity and are, therefore, seen as atypical women. Both are fictionally and symbolically drowned but return from death. While Joan comes back as a witch bringing fear to the people of the town of Terremoto, Felicia also resurrects as "an enormously fat woman dressed in a sopping-wet blue velvet gown . . . her breasts rose from the bodice like two full moons" and "[d]amp strands of red hair straggled down her boated face like trickles of blood," causing repugnance in Mr. Redmond (323). Felicia comes back as a monster questioning even more the ideal notion of femininity, paralleling, in a way, the transgression which Joan experiences through her writing.

Yet, Joan still needs to dismantle the dualistic images which for ages were imposed on women, both in her life and also in her narratives. As shown in Chapter Three, Joan then shifts the narrative into the antagonist's point of view. By doing that, she kills the image of the angel which the heroine Charlotte stands for. However, Joan also kills the monster when Felicia is drowned in the story, disrupting the convention and gaining freedom to represent women beyond stereotypical extremes. Rao argues that, as Joan changes the end of *Stalked by Love*, her fiction not only transgresses the conventions of this genre—as I point out in Chapter Three—but also defies "its typical characterization of woman, always indissolubly located around the two polarities of good and evil, angel and monster" (138). In the end, by making Felicia enter the maze and discover several other Ladies Redmond—the projections of Joan's multiple personalities, as it is shown in

Chapter Two—Joan emphasizes that women writers, like her heroine and herself, can be represented in several ways other than the dualistic definitions perpetuated by patriarchal ideology that sustained the images of women as being either angels or monsters.

Furthermore, Atwood's narrative refuses to opt for one of the extreme images that defined, for a long time, the woman artist, as *Lady Oracle* does not create a fixed self-identification for Joan. McKinstry claims that "[i]n reconstructing the past that she previously destroyed, Joan does not fix herself into those roles" (67). Besides, having "more versions to come," the writer's "imagination saves her from the limits of her own fictions" (McKinstry 68). In *Lady Oracle*, as in other novels of the artist written by women, the disintegration or division of the artist's self is not resolved in self-integration. As Stewart shows, none of the women writers' novels she analyzes, including Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, depicts the artist as "a self-made, fully integrated human being, artist and woman" (180). What *Lady Oracle* and other contemporary novels of the artist by women highlight is not the integration between these two different definitions of women artists, but the complexity of women's subjectivities and of the many possibilities of representation of female characters. Hence, portraying Joan and other women who transgress the literary depictions of literature, Atwood emphasizes the power of women's text and the complexity of their subjectivities.

Elaine: Painting Women beyond the Canvas

Cat's Eye also shows the difficulties in being a woman artist through Elaine's artistic experience. The novel questions the view that the roles of woman and of artist are incompatible. When the protagonist decides to have a retrospective in the city of Toronto, she becomes upset because only an alternative gallery accepts her exhibition. Elaine says that she is "cheesed of because the Art Gallery of Ontario wouldn't do it. Their bias is

toward dead, foreign men” (16). When she says that this important art gallery is biased towards male artists from other countries, the painter denounces the fact that Canadian women’ art is not much prestigious in the artistic tradition of Canada. Besides, even though Elaine does not want to return to the city of Toronto, she does not cancel the exhibition because she knows “how hard it is to get a retrospective anywhere, if you’re female” (91).

Because of these difficulties which women face to become artists, Elaine, like Joan in relation to literature, experiences the tension of being both a woman and an artist. Like *Lady Oracle*, *Cat’s Eye* also problematizes the traditional definition of the woman artist seen through the opposite images of the angel, the woman who conforms to stereotypical femininity, and of the monster, the woman who transgresses social limitations through artistic fulfillment.

When Elaine is a teenager, she plays a game to scare her friend Cordelia by pretending that she is one of the twins who she makes up for her self: the Elaine who walks in the daytime and the Elaine who is a vampire (256-57). Although she is not an artist yet, this division between the monster and the ordinary woman seems to signal her perception of the dualistic terms socially constructed for women. Elaine’s game may be read as a foreshadowing of the tension between the artist and the woman, which she experiences later when she finally becomes a painter.

During her artistic formation at the University, Elaine challenges the incompatibility between the role of women and the artistic career, unlike most women who study art with her. The protagonist denounces the limited choices which women who want to be artists could make. In her art classes, Elaine finds out that “[n]one of the girl students wants to be an artist” but “teacher of art in high schools, or . . . a curator in a gallery” and in some cases, these women “are vague in their wants, which means they intend to get

married before any of these other things becomes necessary” (301). Elaine’s female classmates feel that they have to choose between fitting into the traditional view of womanhood—by becoming a teacher or a housewife—and choosing an unconventional and challenging profession for women, by becoming an artist. Nonetheless, Elaine defies these two limited options when she decides to become a painter. By choosing to be a woman artist, and a very good one, she not only breaks with this tension in women’s artistic experience, but also shows that women are much more complex through the portrayals of women in her paintings.

Although Elaine decides to contest these biased beliefs that discourage women from involving in artistic production, she does not feel appealed to feminist theories and movements. For example, in an interview before her art exhibition, Elaine says that people call her a feminist painter; however, she does not like party lines and does not see any point in discussing feminism (97). Elaine only “like[s] that women like [her] work” (97). The painter’s resistance to feminist commentary, according to Judith McCombs, “partly camouflage[s] her pursuit of female icons and myths” for “Risley’s life and art do engage and dramatize a number of salient feminist concepts—albeit at times covertly, ironically, or with radical extensions” (14-5). There is, therefore, a distance between what the painter really says and what her art conveys once her paintings seem to express covertly and sometimes radically the feminist critique of artistic tradition.

In this same interview, Elaine is asked the reasons why she painted several images of women. For Elaine, women paint women but other men also paint women. The interviewer remarks, nevertheless, that other artists do not paint women like that (97). Despite Elaine’s resistance in being placed in political movements such as feminism, her fictional audience and critics—and the readers of the novel—do not miss the political reflections behind her depiction of women’s bodies. Elaine’s representations of women’s

bodies function as Joan's portrayals of Victorian and Gothic heroines. While Joan criticizes literary depictions of women as passive and weak characters through her powerful heroines, Elaine challenges traditional visual representations of women through her portrayal of unconventional images of women's bodies.

Elaine's choice of depicting women's bodies is significant because it problematizes artistic representations of women. In women's literature and art, the emphasis on the body becomes a means of showing and contesting social and political limitations in representation. The female body is the locus of power politics, as Hutcheon claims (*Politics* 152). Through the depictions of women's bodies, the protagonist of the novel of the artist often reveals the political implications in the representation of women. Grace Stewart argues that in these novels, "[w]ith a woman's body, the artist-heroine is continuously reminded of her war against social constructs that restricted her as an artist; yet that war plays havoc with her self-image" (179). In novels like *Cat's Eye*, the focus on the woman artist's body and on the limitations which her body suffers also denounces personal and social constraints which women undergo as, for instance, the dualistic roles of women artists with which Elaine is faced once she decides to become a painter.

The emphasis on the body in women's artistic representation also renders the artist the possibility of revising the notion of femininity created through the depictions of women in traditional visual art. According to Hutcheon, "[t]he body cannot escape representations and these days this means it cannot escape the feminist challenge to the patriarchal and masculinist underpinning of the cultural practices that subtend those representations" (*Politics* 142). The body is, therefore, a locus of political resistance through which women artists can contest the negative images of women.

In the novel *Cat's Eye*, Elaine shows the sexist underpinning beneath the negative representation of the female body in Pre-Raphaelite art. When she has a love affair with

her teacher Joseph, Elaine realizes that he is “rearranging [her]” in a style which she later recognizes as “late nineteenth century. Pre-Raphaelite” (332). According to Ahern, “Josef is a walking catalogue of patriarchal myths of femininity: he feels women should live for him . . . and has an objectivizing, Pre-Raphaelite vision of women as helpless flowers, or shapes to be arranged and contemplated” (12). However, Elaine’s art defies patriarchal views of women as objects that should be arranged and contemplated through paintings. By challenging the traditional images of the female body, her paintings also critically reconstruct women’s representations in art. In this sense, Elaine’s art differs from Joan’s texts. While writer Joan begins her experience with literature by imitating firstly the conventions of literary representation of the Gothic and Victorian heroines, the descriptions which the reader has from Elaine’s paintings show that her portrayals of women’s bodies transgress, from the start, the ideal notions of femininity in patriarchal society.

The visual representations of the woman’s body which painter Elaine’s art mostly questions are pictures from women’s magazine which she reads from infancy to adolescence in the forties and fifties. When Elaine is a child, she “cut[s] out pictures of women, from *Good Housekeeping*, *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Chatelaine*” (153). These magazines display an ideal image of women in the house, very often the image of a housewife. Young Elaine critically observes that “[t]hese women have dresses with puffed sleeves and full skirts, and white aprons that tie very tightly around their waists. They [also] put germ killers onto germs, in toilet bowls; they polish windows” (153). The ideal view of womanhood in these magazines is limited to the perfect and efficient housewife. These magazines, on the other hand, show that women who “gossip too much,” or are “sloppy” and “bossy” are “doing things they aren’t supposed to do” (137). In other words, any type of gendered transgression is seen as negative in the patriarchal ideology endorsed

by these pictures. These examples are some of the stereotypical images which Elaine parodies in her art to question ideal views of femininity.

For instance, Elaine's paintings of Mrs. Risley, her mother—who is portrayed as an unconventional woman throughout the novel—criticize these images of the female body which are related to traditional representations of femininity. One of these paintings is described as the representation of her mother in collage, made from the illustrations from the magazines *Ladies' Home Journals* and *Chatelaines* (167). In another picture, the artist paints her mother “in her slacks and boots and her man's jacket, making chokecherry ham over the outdoor fire” (167). Elaine calls these series of pictures *Pressure Cooker*—a term that seems to refer not only to the traditional role of women in the kitchen, but also to the way they feel “pressured” by social constraints. However, Elaine does not say that her objective is to question that ideal notion of femininity, but to simply paint her mother. Again, there is a gap between what Elaine says and what her art really expresses about the woman's body once her art critics and viewers believe that *Pressure Cooker* “is about female slavery” and “a stereotyping of women in negative and trivial domestic roles” (167). These paintings do seem to defy the traditional view of womanhood of the forties because while in the magazines women are shown doing the housework indoors, in most of Elaine's portrayals of Mrs. Risley, this woman is painted outdoors, emphasizing her freedom and “her dislike of housework” (167). Besides, while the magazines only depict women in skirts and dresses, the female figure that represents Mrs. Risley wears men's clothes, showing that in Elaine's portrayal of women, they are not slave of the conventions of clothes.

Elaine's works also contest the female body as an image of ideal femininity represented in the paintings of saints in Renaissance art. In one of her images of the Virgin Mary, the painter depicts the saint “in blue, with the usual white, but with the head of

lioness,” which is, according to Elaine, referred as Christ’s traditional iconography (375). While Elaine is painting this saint, she puts into question this Christian iconography: if “Christ is a lion . . . why wouldn’t the Virgin Mary be, a lioness?” (375). Elaine defends the analogy of women with being a lioness saying that this symbol seems to be “more accurate about motherhood than the old bloodless milk-and-water Virgins of art history” (375). According to Sharpe, the protagonist “debunk[s] the traditional representation of the Virgin Mary as the eternal woman in this painting” (par. 30). Likewise, McCombs claims that Elaine attempts to create a non-traditional female iconography (18). Hence, by painting a saint who is, like a lioness, “fierce, alert to danger, wild” (375), Elaine criticizes the submissiveness of the representation of women and of motherhood in Renaissance art.

Through these series of portrayals of the Virgin Mary, Elaine also defies the sacred and ideal figures of women in religious representations. According to McCombs, Elaine’s paintings celebrate a female savior, who “goes back to ancient female myths and goddesses suppressed by the Christian patriarchs” (18). For the critic above, this powerful archetype of femininity which the female saint represents is suppressed by Christianity, which humanized Mary to discredit her worship. Nevertheless, Elaine’s art represents a Mary which “re-credits and re-claims female history” (McCombs 18) and the power behind the depiction of this woman. All the images of saints which appear in the novel—such as the apparition of the saint when young Elaine falls in the ravine, the representation of the Virgin of Lost Things which she sees in a Mexican church, and Elaine’s artistic depictions of the Virgin Mary—are references to unconventional female archetypes. These alternative portrayals of women stand for “versions of the pre-Christian Great Goddess: moon-mother; God-mother, creatrix of the universe” (McCombs 18). These saints also symbolize the female figure which is more complex and powerful than the conventional images in religious representations of women which Elaine’s art contests.

Through the several portrayals of her neighbor Mrs. Smeath, a woman who is submissive to social and religious impositions, Elaine's art also problematizes the traditional representations of the female body. Mrs. Smeath is her friend Grace's mother, a religious fanatic who introduces the protagonist to religion. When Elaine becomes an adult, she does not know why she hates Mrs. Smeath so much (384). Yet, the narrative suggests that the protagonist does not like this woman because, when Elaine is a child, she finds out that Mrs. Smeath encourages Elaine's girlfriends, Cordelia, Grace and Carol, to punish her. In Mrs. Smeath's moralistic view, Elaine is like a "heathen" and there is not much to expect from the people of her family (199) since they are not religious. Mrs. Smeath thinks that the girls' hard treatment on Elaine "serves her right" (199).

By painting this woman in an unconventional way, Elaine defies that religious and moralist view of womanhood which Mrs. Smeath defends. In one of her works, for instance, Elaine paints Mrs. Smeath "bare naked, flying heavily through the air . . . Mrs. Smeath is stuck to her back like an asparagus beetle, grinning like a maniac" (248). It is significant to mention that, in the description of this painting, Mrs. Smeath is also portrayed as a monster, which is a symbol of transgression of the ideal womanhood of patriarchal ideology, as it is discussed previously. This new version of Mrs. Smeath, as a threatening and monster-like body, thus, challenges the notions of ideal femininity based on religious morality which this woman appears to represent to Elaine as a child.

Her art also shows that it is possible to represent the female body as a means of disrupting the limitations imposed on women like Mrs. Smeath, emphasizing, instead, the complexity and multiplicity of women's subjectivity. When Elaine is painting her version of her neighbor, "[o]ne picture of Mrs. Smeath leads to another" and later "[s]he multiplies on the walls like bacteria, standing, sitting, flying, with clothes, without clothes, following [Elaine] around with her many eye like those 3-D postcards of Jesus" (368). In this work,

as Elaine represents this woman flying and multiplying on the wall, the painter symbolically attempts to free Mrs. Smeath from the moral and religious limitations which have restricted her in society. Instead of being a woman confined to these conventions, Elaine's Mrs. Smeath has the possibility of being multiple, in the several version of women's bodies through the protagonist's art.

Elaine's art also presents a distorted image of the female body. As I discuss in Chapter Two, her painting *Leprosy* represents Mrs. Smeath with half of her face showing like the villainess of the horror comics Elaine reads as a child (383). In another series of panels called *White Gift*, Elaine paints this woman first wrapped up in white tissue paper like a "mummy, with just her head sticking out," and in another panel, Mrs. Smeath has "one large breasts sectioned to show her heart . . . the heart of a dying turtle: reptilian, dark-red, diseased" (384). These images of the female body are so shocking to Elaine's audience that, in her first exhibition, the painter is attacked by a religion fanatic. Elaine herself sees that her images of women are "indecent" and "desecrated" (385). Through these representations of women, Elaine's art reveals that the female body can be represented as imperfect and distorted, differently from the ideal angelic figure of traditional art. These paintings also show how women like Mrs. Smeath are turned into monstrous images by their extreme endorsement of the ideology of femininity.

In Elaine's first art exhibition, people also identify, in her paintings, the critique towards traditional representations of the female body. Jody, one of the women artists who organize Elaine's exhibition, selects the paintings of Mrs. Smeath and of the Virgin Mary, which, according to her, represent the woman as "anticheesecake" (380). Elaine's art could be read, therefore, as a critique to the conventional image of women as a cheesecake, a metaphor to the view of femininity which is limited by the ideals of physical perfection. Jody also poses a question which is significant for our understanding of Elaine's critical

paintings: “Why should it always be young, beautiful women? It’s good to see the aging female body treated in compassion, for a change” (380). Jody recognizes that, when Elaine portrays the “wild” Virgin Mary and the monstrous and distorted Mrs. Smeath, seen as different and even shocking images of women—the anticheesecake—, her art defies conventional representations of the female body as simply objects of pleasure. As Linda Hutcheon claims, when women writers like Atwood depict the female body as diseased and injured—such as can be seen in Elaine’s versions of Mrs. Smeath—it is a means for the writer to protest the male erotic gaze (*Politics* 154-55), which is provided by the ideal notions of beauty in magazines, advertising and traditional paintings.

In her last exhibition, Elaine reexamines and comes to terms with her depictions of Mrs. Smeath. The last time the protagonist mentions her paintings of this woman, Elaine begins to understand that Mrs. Smeath is not simply a version of morality and ideal womanhood problematized in the painter’s art, but also a subject to the social impositions of society and religion. Forgetting her hate, Elaine realizes that “these pictures are not only mockery, not only desecration” because Mrs. Smeath’s eyes also reveal her defeat, uncertainty, melancholy and heaviness as “[t]he eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man” (443). In this passage, by sympathizing with the woman, the artist realizes that Mrs. Smeath’s attitude is not only a consequence of her wish to be an ideal woman, but also a result of the patriarchal impositions of the religious beliefs to which Mrs. Smeath adheres. Elaine reveals that her neighbor, like the images of women represented in the magazines and in Renaissance art, is, in a way, a victim of that social, cultural and religious tradition.

Therefore, in Elaine’s artistic experience, similarly to what occurs with Joan in her literary development, the painter revisits visual art in the perspective of a woman artist, putting into question the representations of women’s bodies. By creating powerful images

of women's bodies, Elaine defies the definition of women as objects of the male gaze in traditional visual art and, as a consequence, challenges the patriarchal view of women's representations in religion and society. Her images of women also reveal the imperfection and distortion of the body to criticize stereotypical images of women explored in magazines and advertisements.

Nevertheless, differently from Joan, Elaine's political intentions in terms of feminism are expressed more covertly as she ironically avoids being part of women's movement throughout the novel, while Joan, in the end, is openly worried about the stereotypical representation of her women as victims of the literary tradition of the past. Still, as shown above, Elaine's visual depictions of women carry, like Joan's literary representations of the Gothic and Victorian heroines, a strong reaction to patriarchal ideology. Furthermore, Elaine does not initiate her artistic experience by copying traditional representations of women, as Joan does in a first moment. Her art functions, from the beginning, as an unconventional mirror—as the cat's eye marble—which emphasizes the power and complexity of women's bodies and subjectivities.

Joan and Elaine show that it is possible to be both a woman and an artist by challenging the problematic definitions of women involved in creative production, in which the artistic vocation and womanhood are seen as incompatible roles. The complexity of these two characters also breaks with the traditional split between the roles of woman and artist because the characters' subjectivities cannot be limited to this dualistic definition of the woman artist's self. As Hutcheon says, "Atwood's women seem to possess subjectivities that are much less easily defined in traditional terms, that are more fragmented and even multiple" (*Canadian* 145). Therefore, instead of being divided into women and artists, Joan and Elaine reveal themselves with multifaceted subjectivities. Moreover, Atwood problematizes stereotypical definitions of women's subjectivities as the

complex female characters, which Joan writes about, and the strong images of women's bodies, which Elaine creates, question traditional representations of women in literature and art. Writing beyond the ending of patriarchal ideology, Atwood, thus, challenges restrained designations of women artists' subjectivities and conventional representations of women's bodies in both literature and art, creating, instead, a locus of alternative expression for her female characters—one that values their multiple and complex subjectivities.

CONCLUSION

Representation and Self-representation as a Visual and Political Practice in Atwood's Novels of the Artist

Both *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* are narratives which regard contemporary representations as unconventional mirrors in which artists and writers critically attempt to depict their complex subjectivities and alternative perceptions of the world. My point, which I have demonstrated, is that, by revisiting some traditional notions of literary and artistic representations of the past, Atwood challenges the process of artist production. Besides, I also show that, when these two novels focus on the personal and artistic formation of a writer and a painter, they bring to the fore the construction of subjectivity through literature and art, especially the process of representation of the artist's self which is, in the case of Atwood's protagonists, inevitably related to the discussions of gender issues and the protagonists' locus of enunciation, the Canadian culture.

When *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* question traditional views of representation in literature and art, Atwood draws our attention to some visual metaphors which symbolize the several notions of literary and artistic depictions of the world and of the self. Thus, in addressing the visual metaphors elaborated from Greek philosophy to more contemporary literary and artistic aesthetics and reviewing the notion of subjectivity in literature and art, I show how Joan's and Elaine's mirrors and visual images are different from the traditional notions of literary and artistic representation. Besides, I have argued that Atwood's works can be defined as self-conscious as well as postmodern representations in the sense that both novels adopt the view of art as a mirror, which, instead of faithfully copying the world and the artist's self, problematizes the processes of representation of the world and of subjectivity.

I have also discussed how Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* are used to question the role of representation and self-representation once the protagonists' aesthetics rework the metaphors of vision and mirrors. Instead of partaking in the notions of literature and art as a transparent mirror, in *Lady Oracle*, writer Joan pictures the baroque and other unconventional mirrors, not to mention some shattered glasses. Joan's distinct mirrors are symbols of how Atwood's writer regards literary representation which is seen as a broken and open mirror surface that does not limit the complexity of a multifaceted view of the self and of the world. Likewise, I have also argued that painter Elaine uses anamorphic mirrors, such as convex surfaces, which foreground the slippery nature of her personality, to contest traditional notions of subjectivity in visual representations. Besides, Atwood's painter emphasizes, through the symbols of imaginary vision and the third eye, represented by her cat's eye marble, the artist's alternative power to see beyond the limitations imposed by ordinary forms of vision endorsed by traditional art and aesthetics.

Using unconventional modes of depicting their own selves, Joan and Elaine reveal the contemporary belief that subjectivity is more complex than we apparently think. In this sense, both novels question, through self-conscious literature and art, the traditional perception of the self as a unity and as a final product. In *Lady Oracle*, for instance, the attempt to create a full sense of the self is subverted once subjectivity is "represented as being an unstable entity: it doubles and multiplies through the different identities assumed simultaneously by Joan Foster and/or Loiusa K. Delacourt as well as through the spectrum of her projected personae" (Rao 144). In other words, Atwood creates a character with several other possibilities to represent her self in her life and also in her fiction, showing, thus, alternative representations of subjectivities that are always in process of becoming.

Another point that was raised is that Atwood's narratives discourage any attempt to search for a stable identity because of the very inconsistency and elusiveness of the

concept. At the ending of both novels, the reader does not know if the protagonists will ever find out a definition for who they really are. As Robert Lecker puts it, it seems that in Atwood's novels "there is a parody with all of the conventions associated with the 'search for identity in literature'" (192). Similarly, in *Cat's Eye*, Elaine's personal development emphasizes subjectivity as a process rather than as a whole and coherent entity. In this novel, "there is no final resolution to [Elaine's] search [for identity], for she is caught in an obsessive cycle that compels her to replay in her mind the fragmented pieces of her childhood in a futile attempt to recover a unified-self-image" (Ahern, 8). Seeing her life as several transitional and fragmented possibilities of her self, Elaine, similarly to Joan, never finds a unified concept of identity. In my point of view, highlighting the fragmentation and inconsistency of these protagonists' personalities, Atwood's novels suggest that grasping the self is far less important than perceiving, through literature and art, the complexity of subjectivities.

In *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*, Atwood's aesthetics and her view of the construction of subjectivity foreground not only the formalist inquiry of the ways literature and art represent the self, but also the political and ideological assumptions of the representation of subjectivity. According to Linda Hutcheon, "[i]n all Atwood's fiction, formalist concerns (such as parody and metafictional self-reflexivity) are never separate from political ones . . . this is the paradox of art as both product and process, as both artifact and life" (*Canadian* 157). Taking into consideration Hutcheon's view that Atwood's self-conscious literature often reveals the politics of representation, I have argued that both novels bring into question the discussion about Canadian literary and artistic productions by problematizing the role of the Canadian artist in Joan's texts and in Elaine's paintings. When I affirm that *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* reflect on simplistic definitions of Canadian literature and art, my point is that the narratives also attempt to

show that contemporary Canadian literature and art can be seen as more complex than simply a repetition of European literary and visual tradition. Atwood emphasizes the complexity of contemporary cultural production by reviewing, parodying, and questioning traditional literary genres and artistic styles.

On the one hand, in *Lady Oracle*, Joan rewrites themes, characters, and structures of several European literary conventions of the past which Canadian literature was, for a long time, bound to, especially literary traditions from England, such as the Gothic and Victorian poetry. In her last texts, Joan turns these literary traditions upside down, by creating unconventional characters, challenging the sense of closure of conventional plots, and disrupting rigid genre definitions. On the other, in *Cat's Eye*, Elaine's visual representations not only draw our attention to the complexity of Canadian art through the parody of several artistic conventions of the past but, in this novel, Atwood also seems to be preoccupied with the problematization of what is seen as Canadian cultural identity. *Cat's Eye* shows that Canadian culture is perceived as fragmented and multilayered as Elaine's perception of her subjectivity. Besides, in her attempt to express what Canadian cultural identity is, the protagonist's depictions of the groups of immigrants with whom she identifies are significant to the view of Canadian culture as a mosaic. Unlike *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye* is especially concerned with the representation of the multiplicity within the Canadian culture.

It should be mentioned that that *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye* challenge patriarchal depictions of women's selves and their bodies in literary and artistic works of the past by, firstly, dismantling the mirrors of art which depict women as passive objects and, secondly, by questioning traditional representations of women artists which create, for these characters, a tension between traditional views of femininity and artistic fulfillment. In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood criticizes conventional portrayals of women in British literature

by creating a powerful woman writer who can, in parallel with Atwood, rewrite, through parody, stereotypical depictions of women in Victorian and in the Gothic literary traditions. By means of parody, Joan rewrites these literary traditions from a woman writer's perspective, defying the confinement and passivity of the Gothic heroine and the women depicted in Victorian poetry. Furthermore, the use of parody in this novel provides "a social and cultural critique of the destiny of women: as characters, as authors, and as readers" (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 214). Parodying and contesting the destinies of women writers in the novel of the artist, Atwood also problematizes the dualist roles—the angel in the house or the monster/witch—to which the woman writer is bound in literary tradition. Atwood breaks with this restrictive perception of the woman writer's subjectivity as *Lady Oracle* shows that the women writers' selves are often more complex than this simplistic definition suggests.

Similarly, *Cat's Eye* also contests the dilemmas which women artists experience through Elaine's defiance of the social and cultural belief that women are unable to attain artistic fulfillment. The painter recognizes the difficulties to be a woman artist and, although she does not partake, at least personally, in the feminist discussion, Elaine seems to criticize, through her artistic involvement, the social and cultural impositions on women artists. Furthermore, in *Cat's Eye*, Atwood questions the images of women's bodies depicted in visual representations, such as European art and women's magazines, which reinforce the patriarchal view of femininity. Elaine parodies the representations of the body of conventional art and advertisements emphasizing the complexity of women's self. In her own images of female figures, instead of creating the passive and often ideal view of women's bodies which become the objects of desire of the male gaze, the painter depicts monsters, lionesses, distorted and multiple bodies which symbolize Elaine's perception of women's subjectivities. Thus, through this critical reflection on the portrayals of women in

literature and art, Atwood's two women artists and their literary and visual portraits defy traditional representations of women in literature and visual art.

Hence, I have argued that in the subversive mirror in which the Atwoodian artists see their world and their subjectivities, these women problematize traditional and limiting definitions of representation and self-representation and also foreground important aesthetical and political discussions about the role of the contemporary artist expressed through literature and art. In this sense, this investigation of Atwood's reflections in both novels is relevant to help our understanding of how and why her narratives are considered powerful modes of criticizing the conventional notions of subjectivity, and also critical ways of voicing the conflicts expressed in contemporary Canadian and women's literature and art.

Appendix



Fig. 1. Van Eyck, Jan. *The Arnolfini Marriage*.



Fig. 2. Velázquez, Diego. *Las Meninas*.



Fig. 3. Velázquez, Diego. *Venus at Her Mirror*.



Fig. 4. Robinson, Charles. *The Lady of Shalott*.



Fig. 5. Hunt, William. *The Lady of Shalott*.



Fig. 6. Canova, Antonio. *The Three Graces*.

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