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Time(less) Memories in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

Mémoire (a)temporelle dans *Cat's Eye* de Margaret Atwood

Krisztina Kodó

Abstract

The article focuses on Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye* (1988), which examines the different stages of the life of the protagonist, Elaine Risley, and its events as they are perceived and apprehended in childhood and adulthood. The memories of the adult visual artist (a middle-aged woman in her early fifties) are crucial in how they filter the intensity, pain and sadness of childhood. How does the visual artist provide an outlet for these memories? Time is both a symbol and key element in the novel; however, as Atwood has stated, "time is lumpy." And as she claims in the novel, "You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away." Hence time is not orderly and art as a medium is used to make sense of it. And through the perception of time as a major symbol the traumatic memories of the main protagonist continue to haunt and surface, which creates the concept of time(less) memory.

Keywords: Concept of time, memory, childhood trauma and pain, dissociation, art as a form of self-expression

Résumé

L'article se concentre sur le roman *Cat's Eye* (1988) de Margaret Atwood et examine les étapes de la vie de la protagoniste, Elaine Risley, et comment elle perçoit les événements de sa vie – de l'enfance jusqu'à l'âge adulte. Les souvenirs de l'artiste adulte (une femme au début de la cinquantaine) sont importants dans la façon dont ils filtrent l'intensité, la douleur et la tristesse de l'enfance. Comment l'artiste visuel fournit-il un exutoire à ces souvenirs ? Le temps est à la fois un symbole et un élément clé du roman. Cependant, comme Atwood l'a déclaré, « le temps est compté / plein de bosses ? » (« lumpy »). Et comme Atwood le prétend dans le roman, « On ne regarde pas en arrière le long du temps, mais plutôt au travers, comme dans de l'eau. Parfois, ceci remonte à la surface, parfois cela, et d'autres fois, rien. Mais rien ne disparaît » Par conséquent, le temps n'est pas ordonné et l'art en tant que médium est utilisé pour lui donner un sens. Et, à travers la perception du temps comme symbole majeur, les souvenirs traumatiques du protagoniste principal continuent de hanter et de faire surface, ce qui crée le concept de mémoire atemporelle.

Mots-clés : concept de temps, mémoire, traumatisme et douleur de l'enfance, dissociation, art comme forme d'expression de soi



The concept of time is a key element in human existence. In literary interpretation, time is considered a determining factor that heavily influences and shapes the lives and existence of human beings, animals, nature and events in the world. Time is a fluid concept that is in continuous motion and movement, whether we consider the revolving movement of the planets, the changes of night and day, the seasons or the way in which nature and the animal world smoothly adapt to these eternal shifts. Therefore, time moves, and through its constant motion bears a powerful influence on our lives, decisions and activities.

In any literature¹ since the earliest eras of human existence the concept of time has been shown to influence the lives of human beings. The measure to which the concept of time functions and stimulates events differs from era to era and from writer to writer. Why? Simply because the way in which we perceive time is wholly subjective. What is time? Time is “lumpy,” as Margaret Atwood said in a 2017 *BBC Book Club* interview with James Naughtie, highlighting the subjective aspect. In addition to such subjective aspects, time is a labyrinth that intricately connects our past with our present and paves the way for our future. The concept of time, therefore, is never straightforward or linear but “lumpy” – that is, rugged, hazy and full of obstacles created by us. Time then is an essential component of our existence as well as a key element in all narrative literature.

How can we define time? There is not one single definition, but many varied ones, none of which is wholly satisfactory. In general, time is a dimension in which events have some form of order, a duration and chronology, and their length may be measured as well as the distance between the occurrences. Certainly, time is not an object or a substance that can be seen or touched. But neither is it simply a dimension or a concept and as it has many different aspects it can symbolize many things to many different people in many ways. We look at time through the elements of the past, present and future. “The past may be defined as those events which occurred before a given point in time, events which are usually considered to be fixed and immutable. It can be accessed through memory or, since the advent of written language, recorded history” (“Definition of Time”).

This article wishes to focus on the correlation between time and memory in Margaret Atwood's 1988 novel *Cat's Eye*. Through the different stages of Elaine Risley's life – childhood, adolescence and adulthood – the main events she experiences are perceived and apprehended in various ways. The article concentrates on the endless stream of haunting memories that continuously surface and “illustrate how fragmenting, isolating and dissociative elements of traumatic experience

1) The term literature is a vague concept; here I consider the earliest forms of storytelling, whether oral or written, where time may be viewed as a correlation of symbolic entities interlaced with the lives of human beings.



problematize identity and find unconscious expression in Risley's artistic vision and works" (Vickroy 129). This involves the main character's wholly subjective interpretation of the correlation between memory and setting, locality and people. Furthermore, within the novel, art as a medium is used to make sense of memories, in which time becomes timeless. Images such as faces, settings and locations from the past surface unexpectedly and create time(less) memory, because, as Atwood writes in *Cat's Eye*, "nothing goes away" (3).

The internationally acclaimed, award-winning Margaret Atwood was born in Toronto, Ontario, in 1939. She is the daughter of a forest entomologist and, because of his work as a researcher in the field, Atwood spent a part of her early years in the bush of northern Quebec. She moved to Toronto at the age of seven, but according to various sources she did not attend school full time until the age of twelve. These autobiographical elements are embedded in *Cat's Eye*, too, namely, as the initial biographical features that set the main protagonist's life in motion and locally place her within the Toronto of Atwood's childhood. Margaret Atwood's official website indicates that Toronto has been her place of permanent residence since 1946, with several odd years in between when she studied and worked abroad in the United States, England and elsewhere in Europe. Unlike Atwood, Elaine Risley leaves Toronto and her past to settle on the west coast of Canada. Nevertheless, Toronto is "that elusive place in which individual memory and experience, and collective memory and experience come together" to fully realize its symbolic potentials (Spence 1522).

Atwood's seventh novel, *Cat's Eye* was published in 1988, following the success of *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985. According to a review published in *Cosmopolitan*, this is "the best book in a long time on female relationships...*Cat's Eye* is remarkable, funny and serious, brimming with...uncanny wisdom." *Time*, meanwhile, pointed out that it is also "a haunting work of art."² Perhaps the most appropriate word that defines the novel in its entire theme is "haunting," an atmosphere which tends to hover in midair throughout the whole narrative. This already suggests that this is not a simple story of a woman's life; rather, it brings with it a threat and a menacing feeling of something uncanny to come. To further highlight the eerie effects of the novel Atwood said that "little girls are not made of sugar and spice and everything nice..." which gives an additional eerie and unnatural sense to what the reader should expect (*BBC Book Club*). Among the traumatic experiences that Elaine Risley faces, perhaps the most horrifying is when she is buried in a hole and left isolated there by her friends – unless it is when she is forced to cross the half-frozen ravine alone to retrieve her hat. Her response "conveys well the trauma victim's fear of death and feeling isolated and effaced" (Lifton 18).

2) The two quotations, from *Cosmopolitan* and *Time*, have been taken from the inside cover of Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye*, Bantam edition 1989.



Cat's Eye is considered Atwood's most autobiographical novel, since its trajectory bears some obvious resemblances to that of Atwood's own life, as previously noted. The novel's heroine, Elaine Risley, is a middle-aged, successful Canadian painter who returns from the west coast to her hometown, Toronto, for a retrospective show of her artwork. The structure of the story moves forward on two parallel levels, like a minute and a second hand on a clock, with the two stories happening at the same time, though one always seems to move faster than the other. This interesting structural device helps accentuate the influence past events have on the present time. The narrator is the main character herself, Elaine Risley, who tells the story from the present point of view as well as from specific perspectives in her past (from childhood as she gradually becomes older). The reader sees and experiences everything through Elaine's eyes and sensory perceptions, whether she is a child or a grownup. Her first perceptions focus on Toronto, that is, on the city itself, which was once a dull, provincial city that has become world class in the intervening years – "New York without the garbage and muggings" (14). In the week she is there, her interest in the city's new galleries and restaurants and shops and, in many ways, in the retrospective itself, is only secondary. Her focus, and the novel's, is all on the past, on those images and perceptions that surface unexpectedly, relentlessly, amid the glitz of the transformed city, images of the dead, of a lost time, and of Cordelia, her childhood friend and tormentor, her double. However, amidst all the bustle and action, Elaine says "in my dreams of this city I am always lost" (14). She is lost in her past and the seemingly forgotten memories she would like to shut out – something she in fact did by moving to British Columbia. When she comes back to Toronto for the retrospective exhibition of her life's work, she is forced to confront her memories and herself. Elaine's physical confrontation with her old setting instinctively triggers memories of "bad things that happened" during her childhood – the perceptions and images that she had neatly tucked away in a closed drawer of her consciousness (215). In her adolescence she struggles to overcome her fears and create a fully controlled image of herself toward the outside world: "I am happy as a clam: hardshelled, firmly closed" (ibid.). Physical closure, however, cannot obliterate her traumatic experiences, but it does affect her perception of understanding time as she realizes that "time is missing" (215). She has in fact lost her sense of time, which is perhaps a natural response to the trauma she has experienced.

One of the key factors that connects the beginning with the end of the novel is how Elaine sees herself and her life. In the beginning of the story she says:

This is the middle of my life. I think of it as a place, like the middle of a river, the middle of a bridge, halfway across, halfway over. I'm supposed to have accumulated things by now:



possessions, responsibilities, achievements, experience and wisdom. I'm supposed to be a person of substance. (13)

Her presence in Toronto brings about physical reactions that she must confront and try to understand. This is in fact her past knocking on the tightly shut door of her conscience:

But since coming back here I don't feel weightier. I feel lighter, as if I'm shedding matter, losing molecules, calcium from my bones, cells from my blood; as if I'm shrinking, as if I'm filling with cold air, or gently falling snow.

With all this lightness I do not rise, I descend. Or rather I am dragged downward, into the layers of this place as into liquefied mud. (13)

Elaine left Toronto in order to escape from her past, and in leaving she has mentally built layers upon layers of protective walls around herself. With her return to her hometown and her childhood surroundings, these mental barriers seem to disintegrate, hence her feeling "lighter" and "shrinking" (13). However, her confrontation with her past also means being "dragged" into the "liquefied mud" from the above passage (13). This muddy substance is her memory of her past trauma, which is like a dark abyss. The metaphorical image of the past as "liquefied mud" illustrates her unwillingness to want to create clarity, visibility, within her memories, because it is easier for Elaine to hide within obscurity. In other words, being invisible and indistinct is a method of survival additionally spiced with the previously noted, "I am happy as a clam" effect. This, however, confirms that Elaine is substantially lost. Furthermore, it supports her statement that "in my dreams of this city I am always lost," not merely regarding Toronto, but also as a human being; she has no virtual hold on reality (14).

The symbolic meanings of clarity versus obscurity pursue Elaine throughout the novel as she gradually moves from obscurity – a dark abyss of memories – to clear visibility. However, in the very beginning of her story she is "merely in disguise" (14). This is simply because she is not what she seems to be. She has a career as a visual artist, but as she notes the "word artist embarrasses me; I prefer painter, because it's more like a valid job" (15). Seeing and understanding situations and people clearly without bias and judgement should be one's aim in life, but is it possible at all? Elaine feels she is constantly being observed by the other girls as a child and even as an adult.

The concept of seeing and not seeing things and ideas properly also relates to the title Atwood gave the novel: *Cat's Eye*. The title is a highly charged symbol with several meanings. Perhaps the most obvious meaning is that cat's eye is a semi-precious stone that, as noted in *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, "when cut *en cabochon* (in convex form, highly polished), display a luminous band reminiscent of the eye of a cat" and



thought to bring good luck. The second association is perhaps the most obvious since it relates culturally to the Canada of the 1940s and 1950s, and Atwood's childhood. As background information it is relevant that there was a culture of playing marbles in Atwood's childhood. This was a game for both boys and girls, and children playing this game were supposed to win the marbles, not merely buy them; the cat's eye marble was one of the winning marbles (the second-most valuable).³ However, a marble can also be imagined as a backward crystal ball, which is again linked with clarity and the understanding of both the past and the present. When the 40-year-old Elaine finds her old cat's eye marble in her little red purse, she immediately realizes that "I look into it and see my entire life" (420). The title, therefore, is a symbolic image of Elaine's life, which gives her the comfort and protection to be able to focus on anything other than her pain. This is illustrated in the following passage:

I keep my cat's eye in my pocket, where I can hold onto it. It rests in my hand, valuable as a jewel, looking out through bone and cloth with its impartial gaze. With the help of its power I retreat back into my eyes...

I think about becoming invisible. I think about eating the deadly nightshade berries from the bushes beside the path. I think about drinking the Javex out of the skull-and-crossbones bottle in the laundry room, about jumping off the bridge, smashing down there like a pumpkin, half of an eye, half of a grin. I would come apart like that, I would be dead, like the dead people. (166)

The marble "becomes a means of escaping her tormentors. Its hardness represents the tough persona she adopts later" (Vickroy 135). And, in order to obliterate her pain, Elaine must repress, hence kill, her memories and virtually separate her subconscious from the reality of the present moment. This is her way of surviving:

It's marble season; everyone has marbles in their pockets. Cordelia lets it pass. 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. I can see people moving like bright animated dolls, their mouths opening and closing but no real words coming out. I can look at their shapes and sizes, their colours, without feeling anything else about them. I am alive in my eyes only. (151)

This form of dissociation is Elaine's solution to obliterating the pain caused by her tormentor friends, Cordelia, Grace and Carol. Dissociation is a psychological reaction to trauma, and in *Cat's Eye* this occurs in Elaine's childhood. Elaine's dissociated state shows "her lost sense of competence to act or live in the world is evident in

3) There is a long history of playing marbles, with different rules depending on the particular version played.



Elaine's self-destructive behaviour (pulling off her skin) and in the dissociative tactics of avoidance, fainting, and splitting off from her own body by which she creates a provisional sense of control to alleviate her suffering" (Vickroy 13).

The most frightening experience that Elaine suffers at the hands of Cordelia when she is buried in a hole and trapped there for an indefinite time. Since this is Elaine's most acute experience of the fear of death and her suppression of memory, it is worth quoting at length:

Cordelia and Grace and Carol take me to the deep hole in Cordelia's backyard. I'm wearing a black dress and a cloak, from the dress-up cupboard. I'm supposed to be Mary Queen of Scots, headless already. They pick me up by the underarms and the feet and lower me into the hole. Then they arrange the boards over the top. The daylight air disappears, and there's the sound of dirt hitting the boards, shovelful after shovelful. Inside the hole it's dim and cold and damp and smells like toad burrows.

Up above, outside, I can hear their voices, and then I can't hear them. I lie there wondering when it will be time to come out. Nothing happens. When I was put in the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror.

I can't remember what I really felt...I have no image of myself in the hole. (112–113)

This incident illustrates that Elaine's memory is uneven and hazy, the terror and fear that obviously overcomes her prevents her from finding an escape from her suffering, and this is a dissociated state that lets her drift into a numb trance. Her memory at this point is lost, it is like a black bottomless abyss, and the only way for Elaine to deal with her past is by unlocking her repressed fears and seeing with clarity, like looking into her cat's eye marble. In the end, her return to Toronto is the key to unlocking the missing time. The symbolism of light, and transparency are the opposite of the dark terror that envelops Elaine in the hole and forces her into an instable state. Furthermore, light and clarity is also the path to healing herself and understanding what in fact happened to her.

Elaine becomes an artist, though, as previously mentioned, she prefers to call herself a "painter," whereby her art becomes a tool in which she unlocks her suppressed memories. Among her works there is a self-portrait titled "Cat's Eye," which is also exhibited in the retrospective show featuring her major work. The paintings and other modern works of art featuring in the novel are all non-existent. Atwood, however, most probably had some inspiration from another painter who depicts childhood memories. There is one artist in particular, Louis de Niverville (1933–2019), whom Atwood in fact acknowledges. He was a self-taught artist, who "developed a formidable technique, particularly with collage, to express an astonishing, visionary



world often wrought from childhood memories” (“Niverville”). As a March 2019 *Globe and Mail* obituary notes, his subjects depict a very personal dreamlike world where the “dream becomes real, everyday reality becomes the stuff of dreams, and the personal is transformed into the monumental.” The various de Niverville paintings and works available on the internet are often extremely vivid and colourful,⁴ and the figures somewhat childlike in their formation. Nevertheless, the images are extremely vibrant and powerfully effective in projecting their meanings. These works may have been the examples that Atwood had in mind when she created Elaine’s art and paintings. Some obvious similarities with de Niverville that are nicely embedded in the novel are Elaine’s love of Renaissance art, particularly Leonardo da Vinci, while in the novel these influences were those of her brother Stephen’s theories of physics, her love of colour and precision in drawing biological specimens, and her enjoyment of collage (cuttings from magazines in her childhood). Through her art Elaine creates a sense of separateness from the people around her and the world. Her artistic process formulates itself through “scientific detachment, symbolic structures and disciplined attention to form” (Vickroy 134).

In the novel the self-portrait, “Cat’s Eye,” is unique in that it unlocks and unearths the gaps existing in Elaine’s memories. This is the idea that highlights what is hidden behind the current adult, namely, the past and its influences. A detailed description of the painting reads as follows:

My head is in the right foreground, though it’s shown only from the middle of the nose up: just the upper half of the nose, the eyes looking outward, the forehead and the topping of hair. I’ve put in the incipient wrinkles, the little chicken feet at the corners of the lids. A few gray hairs. This is cheating, as in reality I pull them out.

Behind my half-head, in the center of the picture, in the empty sky, a pier glass is hanging, convex and encircled by an ornate frame. In it, a section of the back of my head is visible; but the hair is different, younger.

At a distance, and condensed by the curved space of the mirror, there are three small figures, dressed in the winter clothing of the girls of forty years ago. They walk forward, their faces shadowed, against a field of snow.(430)

The painting shows Elaine, but the illustration is patchy, like her memory. The upper half of her head, from the front presents, an adult version of Elaine, while the back of her head, through the image of a mirror, shows the young Elaine, possibly the child. These images illustrate how the artist conveys the past and the present. However, these are hazy and rather obscure, with even the specific facial features of

4) Some of Louis de Niverville’s artistic works with titles and dates are available at: <http://www.artnet.fr/artistes/louis-de-niverville/> Accessed 10 January 2020.



Elaine being non-distinct, just like the other figures in the painting. The three “small figures” featuring at a distance are obviously Grace, Carol, and Cordelia, though their faces are shadowed. The painting implies tension and suggests a haunting atmosphere where one is being watched and critiqued. All the uncertainties and misapprehensions that Elaine confronts in her childhood are reflected in her adulthood and also in the painting. In truth, she is never certain of what she does and why. This may signify that Elaine was never truly sure of the girls’ own cruel motives and intentions and that she was not even sure of who she really was herself (as we can only see half of her face). Elaine is still battling with the impression that “I’m locked in. I don’t want to be nine years old forever” (422). This becomes a symbol that frames Elaine’s entire existence (from childhood to adulthood), within which the memories of past and present seem to merge and blend and become non-existent and timeless.

Time(less) memories are key factors within the novel; however, for Atwood, the concept of time is, as mentioned, “lumpy.” The voice of Elaine’s past, though, is real, because it has shape, is permeable, and it is “something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don’t look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away” (3). Atwood therefore renders the past into the present tense through Elaine’s memories, whereby the past becomes the present. Past time flows into the present time and becomes timeless.⁵

This line about the past follows the already quoted phrase from *Cat’s Eye*, that “time is missing” (215). Time is therefore not orderly and here within the novel art as a medium is used to make sense of it. Art becomes a medium through which the pain, sadness and remorse of the past is brought to life and given form. Providing form and colour through her painting, hence visualizing her memories through her art, allows Elaine to experience, as if under hypnosis, the way she felt when things happened, lending greater immediacy to the story and reflecting the fact that most events and emotions remain in a continual present if they remain unresolved. But the past has eventuality, which after so many years still has the power to hurt. Elaine realizes the following:

I know that these things must be memories, but they do not have the quality of memories. They are not hazy around the edges, but sharp and clear. They arrive detached from any context; they are simply there, in isolation, as an object glimpsed on the street is there. I have no image of myself in relation to them. They are suffused with anxiety, but it’s not my own anxiety. The anxiety is in the things themselves. (357)

5) We come across similar images in T. S. Eliot’s *Burnt Norton* section of *Four Quartets: Burnt Norton* (1936), where this game with time and its influences also occurs “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past. / If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable.”



Her art therefore projects the hurt, pain and anxiety that Elaine has been carrying with her throughout her life. But depending on the depths of her trauma, once she has painted the persons and the surfacing images her subconscious projects, she is able to distance herself from them entirely. Although *Cat's Eye* highlights a midlife crisis, since Elaine is in her early fifties – “this is the middle of my life,” she says (13) – this is not a crisis exclusively of middle age, but an accumulation of crises; these are the repressed torments of childhood, the feigned martyrdom of youth and marriage that still simmer in the subconscious. The whole process is like a long chain of events intricately connected in the subconscious of the protagonist. Is Elaine's life so out of the ordinary? We cannot say that she has had a dull and uneventful life; nevertheless, Atwood is able to ingeniously twist and turn the paths of life and render one specific example of an individual's life for her readers. Time, “like a series of liquid transparencies,” therefore, heals and opens new doors, opportunities and solutions, and whichever ones the protagonist chooses leads to new chapters in one's life.

Atwood chooses to bring her main character back to the place where her childhood trauma may be pinpointed, namely, Toronto. Healing for Elaine therefore begins by returning to her hometown. This is important, because self-acceptance will only come from an exhaustive examination of her often-self-deceiving self. And this is only possible by returning to the place where it all happened. The locus of Elaine's bad feeling is Cordelia, her childhood friend, or as Elaine says: “we think we are friends,” but this is a false impression (Atwood 4). Cordelia torments Elaine, then there is a turn from the age of thirteen, when Elaine acquires a “mean mouth” in high school and begins, despite herself, to scare Cordelia and feel power. Elaine's pandering to loyal friends is incredible; she allows them to do whatever they want with her and to punish her in any way they want: Elaine is put in a hole and “buried alive” under boards and dirt or sent across a nearly frozen river in a ravine to earn Cordelia's admiration. To cleanse herself, Elaine occasionally peels off layers of skin. But, as an adult, how can she cast out Cordelia's taunts, which have always trailed her? Cordelia becomes to some extent Elaine's Doppelgänger, and while in Toronto for her retrospective show, she is continuously seeking Cordelia wherever she goes. But the Cordelia of her past is “shrinking” (Atwood 13), slowly but gradually disintegrating into nothingness. This occurs because she cannot help but focus on the past with all its memories, and thereby, confront it.

Cordelia's face dissolves, re-forms: I can see her 9-year-old face taking shape beneath it. This happens in an eye blink. It's as if I've been standing outside in the dark and a shade has snapped up, over a lighted window, revealing the life that's been going on inside.... A wave of blood goes up to my head, my stomach shrinks together, as if something dangerous has just missed hitting me. It's as if I've been caught stealing or telling a lie; or as if I've heard



other people talking about me, saying bad things about me, behind my back. There's the same flush of shame, of guilt and terror, and of cold disgust with myself. But I don't know where these feelings have come from, what I've done. (Atwood 272)

The feelings, however, that surface for Elaine physically torment her in the form of “shame,” “guilt,” “terror,” and “cold disgust.” Her past involves reliving the physical pain that these memories bring with them.

As Elaine wanders through the streets of Toronto, visiting the places she used to frequent as a child, teenager or young adult – such as the “Simpsons Basement” (159), the store that sold “things you could buy for a penny” (421), and her old school which has disappeared and “in its place a new school has risen instantly” (421) – she realizes that it is “Cordelia I want to see. There are things I need to ask her. Not what happened, back then in the time I lost, because now I know that. I need to ask her why” (433).

The answers to the whys are now evident for Elaine, because her rediscovery of Toronto is her own self-discovery. She realizes that “we [Elaine and Cordelia] are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key” (434). They are a reflection of one another, and they cannot exist without the other. But it is now Elaine who could help Cordelia by giving back a part of herself. She is now the stronger of the two, the one who can see with clarity.

Cat's Eye is shocking because we are invited to recognize our own childhood traumatic experiences, friendships and grudges in it. As Atwood notes for a February 5, 1989, *New York Times* piece on *Cat's Eye*, it is the “little-girl behavior” that is the dramatic thread of the book – “The same-sex socialization, to borrow a phrase, that goes on between the ages of 8 or so and 11 or 12 tends to get passed over, particularly with little girls, as not very important. But when you talk to real women and ask them how important it was to them, you get a different answer” (Manserus). Is there a little-girl brand of cruelty? This quotation from *Cat's Eye* certainly suggests there is: “Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized” (136).

As Atwood's little girls grow up, the leader of the bullies, Cordelia, takes on a new role, first as a real person, then as a symbol. “Her actual fate, subtly (in a clever and indirect way) sketched, is to sink into madness. To Elaine, she becomes both the needed, missing female friend and an alter ego. Elaine cannot help her and feels how fine a line divides the artist from the schizoid” (Tomalin). The anger and cruelty that Elaine has bottled up since childhood finally provide an outlet through her creative work. This outlet finally allows her to distance herself from her traumatic experiences and moves from being “cruel and indifferent” and an “emotional blank” to being a “creative non-victim” (Kerskens 136). She realizes that the images and figures in



her paintings, which have brought her success, have drawn on an inner ferocity, ruthlessness and near-hysteria not so different from Cordelia's. But as Elaine realizes, "whatever energy they have come out of me. I'm what's left over" (431). Atwood offers us examples of extreme behaviour to shock us out of our complacency through a mundane story that she places in her hometown, Toronto, where fear and horror incorporate everyday experience and the members of ordinary families assume the power of myth. Why? To quote from Atwood's essay "Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia": "heroes need monsters to establish their heroic credentials. You need something scary to overcome" (68).

In conclusion, *Cat's Eye* is a novel about memory and time, but it is not the chronicle of someone's individual life. This is a novel of time(less) images (past and present) where memories haunt. The work offers the protagonist (who may be any one of us) a series of challenges through which there is a gradual movement from darkness and obscurity to clarity and "old light, and there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by" (445). These memories are nightmarish, evocative, heartbreaking and mundane, offering us not a retrospective but an addition: a new understanding of the psychological depths that a human being may reach in their search for transparency and wholeness.

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