

Mother-Figures in *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*: An Interview with Margaret Atwood

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The Norwegian translation of Margaret Atwood's third novel, *Lady Oracle* (1976), was published in winter 1979. On this occasion Margaret Atwood visited Oslo. She lectured at the University of Oslo in February and kindly agreed to an interview after the lecture. The interview took place at the American Institute and lasted one hour. During the interview, special emphasis was put on the mother-figures in Atwood's novels.

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Int. Did you have specific intentions when you created the mothers and the mother-figures in *Lady Oracle* and *Surfacing*?

M.A. Well, *Lady Oracle* is all about mother-figures. The whole book is about that. I think if *Surfacing* was a search for the "double parent," *Lady Oracle* is a search for "the real mother." Which is the real mother?

In order to deal with this it would be interesting for you to go back to the original Gothic novels, particularly *Jane Eyre* which is the originator of the Gothic Romance. In the traditional Gothic novels, even the ones which are currently written and sold as drugstore literature, there are usually two male figures and two female figures. One man appears to be good, but is in fact evil, another man appears to be evil, but is in fact good. There is a confusion over the identity of the father in such novels.

One of the female figures is the heroine; she is always an orphan; the other is a madwoman. She is not always a wife; sometimes she is a mistress. But she is always mad in some sense, or evil. She is a false mother, even possibly the heroine's biological mother. She is a com-

peting female figure — she competes with the heroine and often tries to kill her. In *Jane Eyre* she tries to set fire to her.

Not until the mad wife is dead or put out of the way can the heroine be united with the true hero. But in *Lady Oracle*, a parody of the Gothic Romance of course, the hero-figures are fabrications on the part of the central character. But the mother-figures are quite interesting to me. I've read a book on labyrinths that said that what you find at the end of the labyrinth is the mother. That is what is down there. Sometimes it is the father as well, but mostly it is the Great Mother. In *Lady Oracle*, the "real" mother, the good mother, is the aunt.

Int. Yes, Aunt Lou.

M.A. The good one. But the difficulty is with the physical mother, the actual physical mother.

I got interested in the connection between mothers and fatness. It is there. It is real. I've got a lot of mail about that, saying "You're absolutely right, my mother is just like that and I'm terribly overweight." While reading the newspapers, which I often read, I came across a popular columnist in the United States called Ann Landers. People write letters to Ann Landers and she tells them what to do. A woman wrote a letter to Ann Landers, which read in part: "Dear Ann Landers, I don't know what to do about my daughter. I have tried everything. She is a very nice girl, but she is terribly overweight. I have tried to force her to go on diets and I've promised her nice clothes if she'll take off weight." She went through a whole catalogue of things she'd done, and Ann Landers answered: "Dear So-and-so, if I were you I would take a good, hard, long, look at your relationship with your daughter. Because you are causing her fatness." So I moved on from there and wrote *Lady Oracle*.

So what do you have? You have an interesting mythology; you have Ann Landers; and in the middle, you have a Gothic Romance, which to me reveals — although it's traditionally thought to reveal just the unravelling of the heroine's relationship with the hero, or the double hero — the mad wife-figure.

Int. In *Lady Oracle*, the mother seems like a "mother-monster"?

M.A. The heroine's mother is a mother-monster, but there are also two good mothers provided for her to choose from. One of them is Aunt Lou; the other is the fraud who is in charge of the Spiritualist Church — but, still, another good mother.

Int. And also the Brownie leader.

M.A. She is a good mother, as well.

Int. You compare her to Aunt Lou somewhere, I think.

M.A. Yes. So the heroine finds a number of surrogate mothers. The problem of the mother-monster is a very interesting one. A parallel book that you might look at is Margaret Drabble's *Jerusalem, The Golden*, which I didn't read until this year. There is an absolutely classic mother-monster in that book. But it is amazing when you start looking for them how often they crop up in books about women. You'd think it would be a father-monster, but it isn't.

Int. Now, your "father" seems to be very distant?

M.A. He is not there. And often in books by women, in which there is a mother-monster, the father is somehow not there. He is not an entity, he's been eclipsed.

Int. In *Lady Oracle*, the father is at first a "distant" person, but at the end, when the mother is dead, he comes more into focus.

M.A. Then he becomes an ambiguous hero. Does he kill, or does he save? Is he another version of her double hero? I started thinking about this a little. (My own mother, by the way, is very nice, so the book has nothing to do with her). I knew somebody who had a mother-monster, which she really was, and I thought of this a lot because this woman could not seem to shake her. She knew that she was awful and destructive and bad for her and wished her ill and all the rest of it. But she couldn't get rid of her. She couldn't just leave or tell her not to phone. And I thought, well, if a man has a bad mother it is not so destructive, because the mother is not the version of what he himself could become. But it isn't just men who have their first relationship with a woman, it is also women. And the mother is also the model on which they are supposed to form themselves. What can the daughter do? She somehow ceases to exist. The girl-child somehow has to cease to exist in some rather important way, unless she can find a good mother substitute.

Int. My initial thought when I had read the two books was that here you have two mothers: one is the mother-saint; the other is the mother-monster — and both their daughters have to liberate themselves...

M.A. One second. The first isn't a saint, for one thing. She is magic, but she isn't a saint.

Int. She doesn't do any harm, at least?

M.A. She doesn't do any harm, no. Well, she does in a way if you actually look at it. She does do harm; in fact, both her parents do harm by encouraging the idea that there is no evil in the world, which is in fact quite harmful to the central character. It's an idealism gone mad, if you like. And I think that that can be just as harmful to someone as to encourage them to believe that there is nothing *but* evil. The mother doesn't intend to do harm, but neither does the mother-monster in *Lady Oracle*. She is not intentionally harmful, she is just harmful.

Int. Yes, she is harmful, but she does know it, in a way.

M.A. Oh, does she? I am not sure.

Int. For instance, when Joan is getting thinner and thinner, the mother comes back with the old accusations which are not valid any more.

M.A. Well, the thing about the relationship between the fatness and the mother is double, and I have observed this in real life. In fact, you'd be amazed how much real people behave like fictional characters.

The girl's fatness gives the mother satisfaction because it gives her a project to work on. And it also gives her living proof that she is superior to her daughter. In any competition she is more attractive, which is important to her, and I think more important generally to mothers of teen-age daughters than one suspects. A lot of them suppresses their feeling of competitiveness and behave more benevolently. But the fatness of the girl is, in fact, more desirable for her. She wants the girl to be fat, at the same time that she is saying that she doesn't want her to be. So that when the girl loses weight, the mother is very threatened. She'll be deprived of her project.

Int. Does that cause the mother to start drinking?

M.A. No, she was drinking before, as I recall.

Int. At least, that's what the girl says. That she must have been drinking beforehand.

M.A. Yes, she is not a deceptive heroine the way the one in *Surfacing*

is. She tells all. And she has a very different narrative style, as you may have observed. She tells everything; and **all** this is "true," although there is so much of it that you have to decide what is important. So you can't depend on her to lie the way you can depend on the one in *Surfacing*. Or shall we say the one in *Surfacing* deceives the reader in the first eight chapters. Whereas the one in *Lady Oracle* is a "narrative voice" rather than the "internal thinking voice." And she is actually telling the story to someone who appears at the end of the book: the man who got hit with the bottle is actually the recipient of this long narrative.

Int. Is Joan's childhood, as a fat and snivelling little girl, the reason for her taste for escape literature and daydreaming?

M.A. She read a lot of romantic fiction when she was fat; which a lot of fat people do — a lot of other people, as well. In fact, the whole Gothic Romance industry is aimed at escape, as you might suppose. But what is interesting to me about it is that there are two forms of escape literature very popular with women. One is the "Harlequin Romance" type. I don't know whether you have these books here, but they are very innocuous: the heroine is a nurse; the hero is a doctor; he is rude to her for most of the book; and there is a crisis of some kind — either he saves her or she saves him. There is a recognition and an engagement. No sex. No murders. No threat. Just this romantic miasma. And this stuff is *incredibly* popular. And wouldn't you know, one of the biggest companies making this literature is Canadian. It was started by a couple of ladies who thought there was no good, clean, literature. The books started to sell, and this has become a multi-million-dollar industry. It is selling all over the world. And that is the kind of story Joan is reading at one point — the nurse in the arctic.

Int. The Mavis Quilp story.

M.A. Yes, that's what Mavis Quilp writes. Where as she herself writes the kind you buy in the drugstore that has a woman in a nightgown or a period-dress, looking fearful and rather aghast. This is a more paranoid form of escape literature because the central plot of it is: my husband is trying to kill me. And I think it is consumed in such great quantities by women because secretly they think their husbands are trying to kill them.

Int. Sometimes they are.

M.A. Sometimes they are. Exactly right. And sometimes they aren't.

And sometimes they think that an alternative husband would be nicer, which is why there is always the choice in these books between two men. And behind this is the mother-monster who is the mad wife. It is a paranoid and fearful form of literature with quite sinister passages. There is always the same kind of plot: sometimes the heroine has met some handsome man, who seems somewhat mysterious, and marries him. Eventually, it turns out that he is the villain. Whichever way, the fear is there. It is quite distinct from the detective novel, which appeals to the reason and which has nothing to do with that kind of fearfulness at all but is the working out of a puzzle.

Int. It seems to me that Joan's fears can be seen in the way she is writing.

M.A. Of course. The whole Gothic plot is about how she's been living her life. I think one thing that happens to us as people is that we invent other people to a much greater extent than we're willing to admit. We superimpose mythic stereotypes on our friends and our relations; if we need a man, we decide that he's Prince Charming or the Devil, alternately or both at once. As far as I can see, everybody does this at certain periods of their life. When they happen to be in love or in a period of crisis, they are all living out some form of Gothic plot. Which is why those novels are popular. Men tend to live out some version of the Western; you know, "Shoot-out on Main Street" and so forth.

Int. To go back to Joan; does she see herself, more or less, as an orphan? She says somewhere that she sometimes imagines her mother not to be her real mother.

M.A. Yes, of course, she sees herself as an orphan, because it's necessary for her to be an orphan. Just as it's necessary that she decides at one point that her husband is trying to kill her, while in fact, he is doing nothing of the kind.

The other thing about Gothic novels is that the main plot is "orphan on the run."

Int. Is it possible to compare the protagonists in *Lady Oracle* and *Surfacing* and find them to be the same kind of person?

M.A. Oh, I would say that although you could find some points of similarity, they are very different. Because the form is different. I wouldn't say *Surfacing* is a tragedy because it hasn't got a tragic

resolution, but it is much more sombre than *Lady Oracle*, which is a play. It is a play on something; it is a Gothic novel which is a parody of a Gothic novel, which also contains a Gothic novel. What you might say in very, very general terms is that what they are doing is similar, that they both have to learn to distinguish between vision and reality. But you could say that about *Hamlet*. You could say that about almost anything.

Int. Aren't you afraid when you write about women of this agegroup, that you, as a person, might be confused with your characters?

M.A. I'm always confused with them. But that's a function of living in Canada. They're not used to having writers. Now, it so happens that I've published a book of short stories in Canada, in which several of the characters are men, narrating their own stories. Some of the characters are old women. Some of them are people that I couldn't possibly be, but I get confused with them anyway. The most noteworthy example was *Lady Oracle*. I read a chapter of it, before it was published, at a reading. I explained in advance that I was a fiction writer, that I invented things, that I made up characters, that I had never been fat. I read the chapter about the mothball; at the end, the first question was: "How did you manage to lose all that weight?" So, there's nothing you can do. Even if you make a male protagonist, which I'll do in my text novel. $\frac{2}{3}$ *Life Before Man* $\frac{3}{4}$.

But in Canada anyway, the literary culture is so new that people have a great hunger for star-figures and people they can identify with. If they read your book and like the character, they like to feel that the character exists — somebody they can potentially have a conversation with or write a letter to, and who is the equivalent of yourself.

The other thing about that is that people are more willing to accept the fact that a man is capable of invention than they are to accept the fact that a woman is capable of invention. Women are still considered to be more subjective; so you get the view that all women can really do is tell the story of their feelings, their own feelings, not their characters'. And along with that goes a sense of being betrayed if you tell them that you've invented things. They feel that you've "sucked them in," that you've deceived them by making something up and presenting it as if it was the truth, even though it says "a novel" on the front of the book. Certainly, there are things that are awkward in Canada — less so in the United States, and much less so in Britain where they are used to having writers around. They are also much more interested in artifice than they are in Canada.

Int. You said somewhere that you, as a female writer, don't belong to a minority. Here in Norway you would; the majority of the writers are men.

M.A. Yes, this was explained to me yesterday. In Canada, this is not true, strangely enough. Although, if you counted them by heads, you would find that there are more men than women. But if you counted them by sales figures, you would find that women sell more books than men.

Int. That is exceptional.

M.A. Well, I think it's partly because women read more books than men do. And it's not totally accepted yet in Canada that literature is of a serious nature; therefore, any man who writes is in danger of being suspected of being slightly sissy.

The thing about Canada is that women have always been there as writers; their presence has always been there. If you're studying literature, you can't ignore them. This is different from the United States; in fact you can teach 19th Century American literature almost exclusively with male writers. Of course, you would have to consider Emily Dickinson, but you can teach just Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Shitman, Thoreau, Emerson and all the usual canon and leave out the women. That was how it was taught for many, many years, and American women studying their culture found it to be predominantly male. However, if you look at British literature, which was what I was taught, being Canadian, you find: Jane Austen, the Brontes, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Rossetti and so on. They're there and cannot be ignored. You cannot teach the English novel without teaching Jane Austen and George Eliot.

Both from my own tradition, which I didn't discover till somewhat late in life, and the British tradition, which I was taught, women were considered important. Still today in Britain, there are prominent writers who are women. You can't leave out Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, etc.

Int. So you feel you had models?

M.A. I had models, yes. My models were British. But when I went to examine Canadian literature there were a considerable number of Canadian women models, as well. As for American literature, they have had a very hard time searching to come up with models. They found them; and I would say, nowadays a number of the best known

American writers are women. But they had to fight to get there. We never had to fight for it. We were always there.

Int. So you had an easier time?

M.A. As women we had an easier time.

Int. Do you, as Canadian women, take up special topics?

M.A. As Canadian women? O.K. I would say the difference is this: The United States is big enough so that you could make a separate cult out of almost anything, including feminism. Feminists of one persuasion or another can almost form their own communities without reference to the outside world because there's enough of them. As Canadians, we have not felt the inclination to — or how would we be able to if we did? — withdraw from our total society in the same way. Women and men belong to the Writers' Union and it's not a discriminatory organization. We don't get attacked within the Union as women. We feel that we have certain common causes with men, although in other ways we may be feminists or working towards other goals. But it's like rolling a stone up a hill. All the time in Canada, you have to work very hard to get the same results that people in the United States have handed to them. They have it harder as women, but they have it much easier as Americans. They have had it harder, I would say. Feminism in America, as everything else in America, took more extreme forms than it did in Canada, partly because the suppression of women was harder. We're a lot closer to the frontier. People are alive today who were pioneers, and we had models of strong women. We were never completely Freudianized. When a great wave of Freudianism swept through the States in the 40s and 50s, and all people of that generation were indoctrinated with it, even at college where there was supposed to be a broader way of thinking, we escaped to a certain extent. Canada, being "culturally backwards," always gets these things later and in weaker forms than the States does.

Int. I see a similarity in the relationship between Norway and Sweden. Like Canada, we always get everything much later.

M.A. And weaker in force. So that it doesn't have so much of a completely monolithic influence. Good for us, you know. We didn't get brainwashed the same way they did or to such a great extent. Some of it is there, but it wasn't scary. McCarthyism, for instance; we watched that on television, but we didn't experience it to such a degree. Some

of it, but nothing as bad. Almost any cultural movement you can name. I think there is a certain resistance in Canada to extremes. Canadians are too sardonic and conservative to become — touch wood — believing fascists or believing marxists who shoot people. They're just too sceptical.

Int. Could it be that you're so "close to nature," as well?

M.A. Well, it's partly rural. Farmers are very suspicious of anything new. But I think it's also that being a small country, we see things from the maid's point of view. To take a Scandinavian example: in "The Seventh Seal," which is a wonderful film, we'd be the servant rather than the idealistic master who plays the romantic game with death. We'd be the fellow who goes for the beer in the kitchen, because the servant has to be more practical and know more about real life and what's inside the master's bureau drawers. Servants exist so that the master can take romantic poses. And in our relation to America, we're the servants. We're sceptical. We see the romantic poses and we think: "Oh, Yeah, wait and see, in a couple of years..."