

Four Feminist Novels by Margaret Atwood

Helge Normann Nilsen

University of Trondheim

Most of Margaret Atwood's early novels express a clearly feminist message.¹ They fall under the category of fiction of protest, though this only rarely diminishes their artistic value. But, like other feminist writers, Atwood is very much concerned to demonstrate that women are oppressed in Western society and their options severely restricted. There are four novels which deal with this theme successfully: *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976) and *Bodily Harm* (1981).² *The Handmaid's Tale* (1983) is the most explicit one in its protest against the mistreatment of women, but in this novel the political message is preached too overtly, reducing its power to persuade. Besides attacking male chauvinism, and modern capitalist society, these novels also describe a quest on the part of the heroines which is basically the same in all the cases. It involves a progress from the old sex role towards a new one, and the essential goal is to achieve self-definition as a woman.

The Edible Woman describes a young heroine who feels caught in a sex role trap that she must break out of or risk losing her identity and self-respect. The title is significant, suggesting a view of women as objects for someone's pleasure. The protagonist, Marian McAlpin, is engaged to Peter, a young lawyer who expects her to become a conven-

1 Lecture presented at The Nordic Association for Canadian Studies, Turku, Finland, August 11-15, 1993.

2 Quotations, with page references, are from the following editions: *The Edible Woman* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1969), *Surfacing* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd. and Wildwood House, 1972), *Lady Oracle* (New York: Avon Books, 1976), and *Bodily Harm* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982).

tional wife. Marian goes along with this to begin with, but gradually realizes that the future that is being planned for her will force her into an unacceptable role.

Her room-mate Ainsley, however, has a different plan. She is plotting to get herself impregnated by a man so that she can have a child without having to bother with a husband. This can be a kind of liberation for a woman, but Marian perceives the flaw in the scheme from the start. For example, when Ainsley does become pregnant, she is suddenly not so carefree any more and realizes that the child will need a father. Ainsley's attempt at independence fails because it is not sufficiently prepared for, or perhaps even believed in. Marian, on the other hand, involves herself in a process of observation and learning which leads to important changes in her view of herself as a woman and human being. This means a casting off of conventional sex role expectations and a quest for a more authentic existence.

The novel contains several cautionary tales of women in traditional roles. Marian's friend Clara, pregnant with her third child, looks like "a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon" (31). The imagery suggests women and their offspring feeding on each other in a symbiosis which is also an imprisonment. The market research firm in which Marian works is a symbol of the patriarchal/capitalistic social order, with the executives on the top floor, the female employees below them and the manual workers at the ground level. The female staff are drudges, given to gossip and overeating. Three of Marian's colleagues are satirically characterized as "the office virgins," young women hungering for marriage, taught by society to regard single females as failures and misfits. They are compared to meat-eating plants, waiting for some male to catch and devour. Marian's landlady is an ogre, surveying every movement of her tenants. She is the type of woman who has internalized patriarchal attitudes and takes it upon herself to police the behavior of other women.

Reacting with horror and disgust at what she sees happening to women everywhere around her, Marian develops phobic and anorexic reactions that symbolize her awakening protest. Her revulsion is directed both against the female sex role and what is seen as a male-dominated society that is rapacious and essentially violent. Another example of this kind of protest reaction is the brief reference to a girl in England who stopped washing herself or changing clothes as a kind of rebellion against sex role

expectations. The male oppressors have created a society reflecting their attitudes, and this emerging insight makes Marian see Peter in a new light. Outwardly nice and handsome, he begins to seem a predatory creature, devoted to hunting, guns and cameras, deeply sexist in his view of her.

Marian's revolt assumes odd and half-conscious forms, which is to be expected from a woman in the Canada of the nineteen sixties. After a dinner at a restaurant she suddenly bolts from her party, running from them like a rabbit from its hunters. Later on, she hides from the others under a bed. Emerging from this hiding-place and confronting Peter, she knows what she feels: "I had realized by this time what my prevailing emotion was: it was rage" (78). In a pioneering sort of way, Marian works her way towards a new identity for herself and a re-evaluation of society and its demands upon women. She is assisted in her quest for liberation by Duncan, a graduate student of English who represents another dimension, another way of being male. Duncan rejects society's materialism and treats Marian as a person. His favorite method of relaxation is to iron. He is a rebel-outsider figure, sensitive and with androgynous traits, and he becomes a kind of guide for her.

Like later Atwood heroines, Marian has another serious problem, a passivity and paralysis in relation to work and creativity. This is both a result of some failing in herself and of society's oppression of women, which tends to rob them of self-confidence and the ability to develop their potentialities. It is part of her progress to overcome her hesitant attitude towards her own talents and power. To create is like giving birth, according to Duncan's fellow student Fish, and Marian is, in a sense, betraying or aborting her own creativity.

Marian and Duncan behave almost like irresponsible children. Duncan has to be taken care of by his two roommates, and Marian is being disorderly, unruly, refusing to cooperate with Peter and the other people she knows. Both she and Duncan are in a state of flux or confusion which is necessary and potentially regenerative. In it lie the seeds of a new, androgynous identity which involves a new flexibility with regard to the demands of the sex roles. Male sexual aggression is a central topic in Atwood's novels and also emerges in *The Edible Woman*. The story of the underwear man, an obscene phone caller, is the example, and Marian finds herself wondering if this person could actually be Peter, her well-dressed, polite fiancée. The suggestion is that behind the most respectable

male facade a sex fiend may be lurking, the archetypal Bluebeard figure that appears in subsequent Atwood fictions.

The text also contains a symbolic structure that illustrates the feminist/liberal message. The streets, buildings and offices of the city represent capitalist/sexist efficiency and ruthlessness, but there are also other areas, or refuges, where alternative values can be cultivated. One of these is the laundromat, the androgynous setting where Marian and Duncan meet from time to time. Another such space is a park near the university: "A huge dimly-white island in the darkness of the night" (170). It is some such island within herself which Marian is discovering, an identity determined by herself.

But first her learning process has to take its undignified course, as when she feels obliged to put on the appropriate, hyper-feminine clothes and get a matching hairdo for her engagement party. Her dress is short, red and sequined, and it comes wrapped in a pink box. This color is the same as that of a cake she has bought. Pink symbolizes the stereotypical, passive role prescribed for women. As Marian puts it: "They treated your head like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented" (208). Increasingly, she sees the existing sex role as a grotesque violation of her integrity. Another telling example of the prevailing absurd view of women emerges when Clara's husband Joe tells Marian that women perhaps ought not go to the university at all. Then they would not feel that they had "missed out on the life of the mind" after they inevitably have become married and have to stay at home. The irony is complete when we consider that Joe is a kind man who really helps his wife with the housework.

In the last part of *The Edible Woman* Marian rebels in earnest. She takes leave of her own engagement party, escaping from Peter the hunter, and joins up with Duncan. They go to a cheap hotel and have sexual relations, an act indicating the heroine's new initiative and independence. Then Duncan, the guide to other realms, takes her to a snowy ravine somewhere in the city, where she experiences another turning point. As it does in other novels, the ravine represents nature, and also, the depths within herself. In this empty, white, cold place she is confronted with her naked self, so to speak, the rock bottom, literally speaking, where she also confronts her own possible freedom. At first she shies away from it all, trying to get Duncan to go back with her to Peter and help her

terminate that relationship. But Duncan, appropriately, expectedly, refuses, compelling her to act on her own.

The famous cake-baking episode at the end of the novel is ripe with symbolic possibilities. The cake, baked by Marian, is shaped like a woman, looks like a pink and white doll, and symbolizes the conventional, oppressive image of women in society. Marian turns it into an object laden with irony, making its fingernails pink and emphasizing all kinds of frilly, feminine details. This is the kind of woman she refuses to be, and she offers her to Peter for him to eat. If this is what he wants, here she is, served up to him. Marian makes no bones about it: "'You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you,' she said. 'You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork,' she, added, somewhat prosaically. Peter stared from the cake to her face and back again. She wasn't smiling" (271).

As can be expected, Peter does not want to eat the cake, but now Marian does. She has finally overcome her food phobia, a result of having acted, asserted herself, won new confidence. The baking is a creative act, representing the awakening of her powers as a kind of artist. In this sense, the cake-doll is the baby that she has given birth to, with Duncan as father-guide. Thus Marian is also overcoming her phobic reactions to pregnancy, gestation, revealed in the repulsive, hallucinatory images of emerging life forms that plague her. This symbolic pattern of return to life, art, creation is a basic feature of the development of several Atwood heroines.

The next novel, *Surfacing* (1978) pursues and develops further the feminist themes of *The Edible Woman*—the protest against the female sex role and the predatory and aggressive attitude and behavior of men towards women—anti-capitalist, anti-American and ecological concerns continue to be part of the author's radical, perhaps revolutionary message of these early novels. The theme of the heroine's dilemma as an artist/writer is also ever-present. In *Surfacing* she involves herself in a search for, among other things, the roots of her creativity, buried within her and relating to her past and childhood.

In this novel, the enemy is even more clearly outlined, the male, economic/technological power structure that dominates and exploits everyone and everything, women, people in general, nature and its resources. The heroine opposes this structure, or hierarchy, setting out on a search

for the values inherent in unspoiled nature. She also explores her psychic depths with an intensity not seen in any other of Atwood's novels. But *Surfacing* is still similar to the other books in that it also constructs a set of opposites, or dichotomies, indicating a clash of values. On the one side are the forces of darkness, so to speak, the capitalist monster, the U.S.A., its technology, corruption, violence, war and death. On the other side we find the victims: women, nature, Canada, animals, peace and life.

The title indicates the nature of the narrator's progress. She comes up, surfaces, at the end of the story after having dived into a lake, literally and symbolically. The pattern suggests a rebirth, or even baptism, from which she emerges as a new woman, or potentially so. She goes in search of her father, who is missing, and ends up in a kind of visionary, trance-like state in which she communicates with the spirits of nature. On the way, she is guided by Indian myths, but goes past even these, finding or envisaging her own spirits, or symbols, which is appropriate for a creative artist.

She travels into the Canadian backwoods with her boyfriend Joe and another couple, David and Anna, sixties radicals who themselves suffer from the alienation from nature that they accuse Americans of having. On their expedition an ironic reversal of sex roles occurs immediately. The narrator is the only one who has any experience of the wilderness on beforehand, and she teaches the men how to fish and how to cope in this new environment. Later, she begins to identify her body with the wilderness, threatened by the encroachment of male technology. This threat is seen as a sort of disease that creeps up from the south, destroying everything in its path. But where the narrator and her party are going, there are still some unspoiled areas left. The lake where her parents' cabin stands is especially significant, "blue and cool as redemption" (15). Salvation is somehow to be found in its murky depths, where the father seems to lie drowned. She follows his trail, which leads her to what can perhaps be called the mysteries of a religion of nature. Somehow, her father's spirit is there.

As a contrast, the sexism of traditional religion is pointed out as the narrator recalls the old priest of her childhood who had seen to it that the women always wore clothes that covered their bodies. Many of them never learnt to swim because they had been ashamed to put on bathing suits. Rebellious also against these restrictions, the narrator, at the end, goes around naked in the bush, rejecting these anti-female attitudes

according to which men give themselves the authority to decide what women can and cannot do.

Before she met Joe, her boyfriend, the heroine had had an affair with a married man and had become pregnant. He did not want to leave his family for her sake, urging her to get an abortion. This she did, leaving her hurt and despairing, feeling guilty towards the aborted fetus and betrayed by the man. She feels compelled to deal with the trauma of the abortion in some way and goes in search of a necessary process of healing and renewal. In the end she allows herself to be impregnated by Joe, and the growth of this new life within her becomes her compensation for the loss of the other child, indicating her saying yes to life again, on more than one level.

One might argue that this is not a typically feminist line of thinking, but it may be that she has to have it both ways, in a sense, a baby and a new freedom and self-definition. Also, Atwood does not shy away from the reality of guilty feelings in a woman who, however justifiable her decision, chooses to abort a fetus. But the heroine's pregnancy is also symbolic of the artistic creativity that is part of her development. She has been the failed, commercial artist who returns to the wellspring of serious art, which is also a form of knowledge. In contrast, David and Joe are mere amateurs and observers, making a film about Canada, or so they think. As so often in Atwood, cameras symbolize a hostile detachment, and the narrator eventually throws both the camera and the film into the lake in a symbolic act indicating her rejection of the men's attitude.

Diving into the lake, she is re-enacting her childhood, even going back to the womb to be reborn herself. At the same time she is beginning to create a new life within herself. Thus, both rebirth and atonement occur. Life struggles against death, everywhere. The novel contains chains of images of the many victims of modern society and its rapacious mentality. There are frogs and other small creatures, imprisoned in jars, then killed, worms for bait, fish caught, herons crucified, landscapes ravaged, a brother nearly drowned, the fetus imprisoned in the womb, then killed at the abortion. All are victims of the same inhuman forces, but at the end, the protagonist takes a firm stand against it all: "This, above all, to refuse to be a victim" (191).

Her quest is originally for the father, but the mother is also important and may have bequeathed something to her daughter in the cabin: "There might be something for me, a note, a message, a will. I kept expecting

that after my mother died, word of some kind, not money but an object, a token" (36). Eventually she does discover and receive the legacies from her parents and uses them for the purposes of her own regeneration. This is also related to her recapturing the "savage" relation to nature as a living organism ruled by spirits and suffused with magic and taboo. This is achieved in her final regression into what can be called a sort of constructive, or healing madness where she communes with the spirits. A frog, for example, she can now see as one of her "ancestors." In Indian fashion, the border between humans and animals is open, so to speak. This "breakdown" is also her final, real act of mourning the loss of her parents, and the lost child, by giving expression to her grief.

What are the essentials of the narrator's quest? It is a search for identity, the influences of the deceased parents, the forces that have shaped her. The father represents nature, Indian myth, the simple, pure life. The mother stands for love, nurturing, as in the vision of her feeding the birds outside the cabin. The descent into the lake is symbolic of the breakdown, the penetration into the deepest layers of the psyche. Emerging, surfacing into sanity, the heroine has achieved a redemption, transformation. There is a pattern of dissolution followed by reintegration on another level. The protagonist finally emerges as a kind of shaman, arriving with new knowledge. The rediscovery of the deities of nature indicates a movement away from the existing, patriarchal religious terms and mythologies. The father-son image is replaced by earth, water, animal life. The narrator imagines herself as an earth-goddess, feels united with the land. She also struggles against the old sex role, the expectations of men. She rejects David's chauvinism, as well as Anna's compliance with it, and Joe's conservatism. She demands respect and equality, and real change from her partner. Joe is seen as being redeemable, and her relationship with him may become successful. At least, such a possibility is hinted at at the end.

Like the previous novels, *Lady Oracle* (1976) is also the story of the development of a young girl or woman, a female Bildungsroman. At an early age, Joan Foster rebels against the expectations that envelop her, represented very forcefully by her mother, and devises her various escape routes. She is the most typical of Atwood's escape artists, women who run away from or outwit society's demands. One of her methods is to write pulp fiction, ladies' romances, creating her own fantasy world.

Joan is discriminated against and threatened by males, and the same thing happens, in exaggerated and melodramatic form, to Charlotte, the young heroine of her romantic imagination. The male, characteristically, both in life and fiction, is ambiguous, duplicitous, a charming seducer and potential attacker/violator. Joan's husband refuses to respect and accord her equal rights, even after her novels have begun to be published. She cannot be herself, be recognized for what she is, by any man. She is expected to act in a certain way, fulfill the demands of a world that, in effect, refuses to see her.

The story of Joan's childhood and early life is rendered by Atwood with comic gusto. From the start, the rebellious girl stands the traditional female sex role on its head, challenging and provoking it, and her mother, endlessly. The mother, herself a victim, still tries to force Joan into a narrow sex role. Thus, Joan feels betrayed by the very person who should have helped and supported her. This trauma is reflected in a recurring nightmare which she has. Here, she falls into the abyss from a bridge that is breaking down. On the other side the mother stands, and Joan cries out for help from her. But she pays no attention to her at all. At the same time, the mother is herself a victim and defines her own plight accurately enough: "She used to say that nobody appreciated her, and this was not paranoia. Nobody did appreciate her, even though she'd done the right thing, she had devoted her life to us, she had made her family her career as she had been told to do, and look at us: a sulky fat slob of a daughter and a husband who wouldn't talk to her" (200).

Throughout the novel the image of the mother haunts Joan, suggesting a feeling of guilt on her part, while at the same time she cannot accept her mother's ideas and attitudes. But Joan also discovers evidence of a kind of rebellion in the life of her mother. Looking at some old photographs, she sees that the mother has actually cut out the faces of her husband and another man, seeking revenge on the male sex in this symbolic manner. But the mother's influence still haunts Joan in a destructive way, undermining her self-confidence, refusing to recognize her real self, threatening the very survival of her selfhood.

Trying to make a success of Joan, the mother wants to turn her into a prize-winning ballerina. Rebellious, Joan overeats, gets fat, comparing herself to a whale or the fat lady in a freak show. She envisages this lady, the fattest in the world, dressed like a ballet dancer, walking a tightrope, and floating across the whole of Canada, impressing everyone, appearing

like "a pink vision to the poor farmers of the St. Lawrence Valley" (111). This grotesque woman now becomes a kind of symbol of female power and defiance. On another, less dramatic level, Joan is inspired to rebel by the example of her aunt Lou, an unconventional, uninhibited woman who defies the expectations that keep women down. Joan is also supported by Leda Sprott, a spiritualist or medium who tells her that she has great creative powers and gives her much-needed self-confidence. Finally, she overcomes her eating disorder, which is an inverse parallel to that of Marian McAlpin, gets back to her normal weight and continues her quest for freedom and independence as a woman and artist.

In her relations with men, Joan is no paragon of virtue. She tends to be detached, a familiar problem for the Atwood heroine, and is also capable of using men in the same way that men use women. But it is also the case that the men in her life, Arthur, Paul or Chuck, the Royal Porcupine, though they may love her and actually be more committed to her than she is to them, still want to trap her in the mother/housewife role. Hence, Joan always fears being trapped and is involved in various escapes and transformations.

Certain stories and fairy tales are used in *Lady Oracle* to underline the feminist message. In H. C. Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" the creature gives up speech in order to acquire legs so that the prince will want her. He, however, eventually rejects her. In the film *The Red Shoes* a ballet dancer finds herself in an insoluble conflict between her career and the demands of her marriage that culminates in her suicide. In Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" the heroine abandons her tapestry-weaving, a symbol of her art, and goes in search of life and love. But this leads only to her death. The knight she loves barely notices her floating by in her barge on the river. The same point is made in all of these legends—a woman who sacrifices herself in any way for a man, or even entertains the idea, risks betrayal and death. Also, a woman cannot have both the love of a man and a career. Joan sums it all up: "You could dance, or you could have the love of a good man. But you were afraid to dance, because you had this unnatural fear that if you danced they'd cut your feet off so you wouldn't be able to dance. Finally you overcame your fear and danced, and they cut your feet off. The good man went away too, because you wanted to dance" (368).

At the end of the novel, the figure of Bluebeard makes his first definite appearance in Atwood's fiction, in one of Joan's romances. He is the

incarnation of male deceit and destructiveness vis-8-vis the female, and Joan realizes that he exists in all the men she has known. This is the male as jailer, rapist, murderer, the monster with "burning eyes and icicle teeth." He is also seductive and has many "cunning disguises." But Felicia, the heroine, resists him: "She refused to be doomed" (377). The statement parallels the one in *Surfacing* about refusing to be a victim. Joan herself, when a strange man approaches her home, hits him on the head with a bottle. The man is innocent of any wrongdoing, but the scene, however perverse, may still be intended to represent an act of female self-assertion and resistance and may thus be associated with the endings of the two previous novels. Still, the unjustified violence remains problematic in this case.

Bodily Harm is perhaps the most accomplished feminist novel that Atwood has written. It has an exciting plot, full of suspense, a number of remarkable characters, and a wealth of symbolic imagery that is suggestive without being obscure. Rennie Wilford, a journalist, has had surgery for cancer, and this disease becomes a symbol of the condition that the world is in. The symptoms are universal violence, oppression and corruption, and an essential feature is the abuse of power on the part of men against women and weaker parties in general. As before, the heroine's task is to resist oppression and stereotyping, including that which she inflicts on herself. She is a failed writer who needs to put her talents to real use and end her various evasive maneuvers.

Looking back on her life, Rennie realizes that all the men she has known have been oppressors in one way or another. She remembers her grandfather from her childhood and now understands that he had been a tyrant towards his daughters. Her boyfriend Jake engages in sadistic sexual pranks with her, and Paul, her lover in the Caribbean, where she goes on a vacation, is inhumanely remote and uncommitted. In Toronto she visits an exhibition of pornographic pictures that is held in a police station. One picture is of a nude woman with a live rat in her vagina. Male sexual violence and sexism are shown with merciless realism in this novel, Atwood wanting to expose the full horror of it.

Threatened by a rapist in Toronto, Rennie goes south to the island of St. Antoine, only to encounter more violence, sexual and otherwise. She becomes involved in the political turmoil on the island, and ends up in prison along with Lora, a woman whom the guards use sexually in return for small favors that Rennie also benefits from. She looks down on Lora,

but is gradually forced to realize that her behavior contains an element of generosity and that she, Rennie may have something to learn from her. There are also other people and events that indicate alternative, positive options, possibilities, for men and women. Minnow, one of the political leaders on the island, stands for decency and justice. He is murdered, but becomes a Christ-like martyr whose influence lives on and inspires Rennie. There is also the curious figure of a beggar who shakes Rennie's hand, which is his way of showing his sympathy and concern. Hands function as symbols of human connection and healing in the novel in a number of scenes or examples.

Though a victim, Rennie is also guilty of passivity and detachment, but she, too, meets various guides who point her in the right direction, so to speak. The beggar is one, Minnow another, and he encourages her to write about the corrupt conditions on St. Antoine and thus contribute something to a solution. Lora also is one who opens up new vistas for Rennie and broadens her horizons. The key word, the thing that all of these people have in common is expressed in the word involvement, and Rennie uses the phrase "massive involvement" (34). This refers to the spreading of a cancer, but also, as she begins to understand, to the general need for a person to become involved with others, the world and its problems, in a serious way.

Only by becoming more active can Rennie break out of her inactive role and do something about her neglect of her talent as a journalist/author. She has tended to shy away from the important issues and has dealt mostly with trivia and superficialities in her work. However, the world refuses to let Rennie alone, and she is forced into closer contact with reality as the political unrest develops. She sees people being tortured and knows that some are murdered, but at the same time she also discovers human faithfulness and charity. Rennie knows whose side she is on, but she hesitates for a long time before finally taking the leap, so to speak, into the depths, beneath the surface of things.

The leap, or change, occurs at the end of the novel, in a scene charged with symbolic meanings. Lora has been beaten almost to death by the dictator's soldiers, or guards, and is thrown into the cell occupied by herself and Rennie. The latter, who for so long has preferred to look the other way, now helps Lora the best she can. It is suggested, not stated directly, that she licks Lora's bloody face, and she gives her all the love and support she can muster. Now she has realized that "there's no such

thing as a faceless stranger" (299), and that the people who resist oppression, sexist and otherwise, must stand together. Significantly, Rennie takes Lora's hand, trying to pull her through, as it were, saving her life. "She holds the hand, perfectly still, with all her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born" (299). Rennie has abandoned her detachment, become involved. This means that she has returned to life, the essence of which is love, relatedness. If she succeeds, Lora will return to life again, be reborn, and Rennie herself will be born, or reborn, into life. This also means a reawakening of her talent.

Rennie is eventually released, and on the plane back to Canada she decides to take up controversial issues in her writing and thus try to do something about the world's ills: "In any case she is a subversive. She was not one once but now she is. A reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report" (301). She realizes that it is her duty to report on the evils perpetrated on St. Antoine, the sexist and political oppression and injustice. The victims, as always, are women and people who are exploited and thus share in the condition of women. Rennie's determination to resist, to make her own decisions, is also exemplified concretely. The man sitting next to her has moved one seat to be near her. After some preliminary remarks he asks her to have dinner with him, and she turns him down. His intentions are too obvious, and Rennie has found a new decisiveness within her. She will lead her own life and not be dependent on men the way she has been. As always, the end of the text finds the Atwood heroine poised for a new kind of life, a new independence and creativity.

The feminism of these early novels was and is still valid as a protest against the way women were treated and regarded and, to some extent, still are in spite of the considerable improvements that have been made in recent decades. But lately Atwood has changed her focus. It seems that she has begun to see that men may also be victims in relationships and that the so-called sisterhood of women and girls is not always what it should be. In a novel like *Cat's Eye* (1988) there is little feminism and no leftist politics at all. Instead, the author gives us, among other things, a revealing view of the jealousies and cruelties found among young girls who are supposed to be friends. The time has come, Atwood may have wanted to say, to move on to new territories in her fiction, and her latest

books, *Wilderness Tips* (1991) and *The Robber Bride* (1992) seem to confirm this.