

# Passive Dolls and Gothic Escapes: Angela Carter's and Margaret Atwood's Early Novels

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## ABSTRACT

*The article deals with Shadow Dance (1966) and Love (1971) by Angela Carter; and The Edible Woman (1969) and Lady Oracle (1976) by Margaret Atwood. It focuses on Carter's and Atwood's treatment of popular genres, especially the genres of romance and Gothic. Although their early writing depicts passive characters who are often presented as doll-like and paralyzed, they develop from victims to survivors. In this respect, Carter and Atwood exploit romance and Gothic to re-write and parody the pre-determined roles and stereotypical conclusions which these traditional genres contain.*

## KEYWORDS

Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, *Shadow Dance*, *Love*, *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle*, genre, romance, Gothic romance, passive dolls, escapist literature, postmodern literature

## Pleasures and Escapes

Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood play with genre boundaries, often transgressing them and giving political (feminist) and personal (psychological) significance to this experimentation. Their transgression of boundaries represents, in Hutcheon's words, closing "the gap [...] between high and low art forms [...] through ironizing of both."<sup>1</sup> Carter's and Atwood's approach is specific. Linda Hutcheon, commenting on postmodern fiction, describes it as "the contradictory attraction/repulsion."<sup>2</sup> Both authors take similar positions in "the parodic use of certain familiar and overtly conventionally plotted forms."<sup>3</sup> Carter and Atwood write in generic conventions while simultaneously transgressing their boundaries. Such a violation of traditional generic boundaries has several consequences: surprise, which challenges the expectations of the reader, as well as a chance to criticize not only the formal aspects of the genre but also the themes which are traditionally explored by the respected forms. This ironic play with literary conventions allows writers (not only Carter and Atwood) to achieve a distance important for their critique. As Hutcheon points out, "[but] in what I want to call 'postmodern' [...] uses of such self-conscious irony, that complicity is used to create an 'insider' position from which to enable a critique from within."<sup>4</sup> Carter and Atwood experiment as well as concur with the tradition. I agree with Merja Mäkinen that although the formulas of popular genres are obligatory, they can be flexible. Mäkinen proposes that:

1 Linda Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 44.

2 Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 133.

3 Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 133.

4 Linda Hutcheon, "The Power of Postmodern Irony," in *Genre, Trope, Gender*, ed. Barry Ruthland (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1992), 37.

[T]he series of expectations between audiences, writers and publishers marketing the fiction, is the formula or format of that genre. Its rules can be stretched but they cannot be broken, if the work is to remain within the category of that genre. And it has to be acknowledged that those generic formulae carry with them certain ideological implications and assumptions.<sup>5</sup>

Carter and Atwood stretch the conventions of genres, and, moreover, genres themselves seem to be open to appropriation and adaptation. The genre is, as Makinen asserts, “a complex amalgam of both preceding conventions and the current usage.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, genres have to address the expectations of the reader in terms of the generic conventions, but the expectations and the conventions change along with historical, social and cultural development. Thus, the synchronicity of the genre allows for paradoxes and tensions of the generic variations when feminist writers adopt popular genre formats.

Let us start with Carter’s and Atwood’s appropriation of the genre conventions of the romance.<sup>7</sup> According to Janice Radway, a romance “is a love story whose gradually evolving course must be experienced from the heroine’s point of view.”<sup>8</sup> To sum up, the genre is constructed around the emotional intensity of the experience of the protagonist falling in love and progresses towards the anticipated and expected happy ending. Comparing it to other popular genres, Makinen observes that “the romance is the only genre dominated by women, both as writers and readers.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, it presents a wider range of more developed female characters than other genres. Carter’s and Atwood’s rewritings of romances portray even more complex and transformative female characters than mainstream romance.<sup>10</sup>

Although neither Carter nor Atwood write romances as such, we can clearly identify elements from romances in their early novels. They allude to traditional popular romances, but without producing texts “to read as an escape.”<sup>11</sup> Carter and Atwood do not construct romances which are experienced as a “reversal of the oppression and emotional abandonment suffered by women in real life,”<sup>12</sup> but rather they point out the real issues of women’s lives by rewriting the happy endings, adopting a masculine point of view, and including violence (metaphorical or actual). Comparing Carter’s *Shadow Dance* and Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* as examples of the authors’ appropriations of the genre, we can see that both novels negotiate and invert the genre-prescribed unequal power relations between women and men. Conventional romances end with the female heroine’s wedding to a man who rescues her. However, Carter and Atwood show that these happy endings emphasize the female protagonists’ inferiority.

5 Merja Makinen, *Feminist Popular Fiction* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 17.

6 Makinen, *Feminist Popular Fiction*, 18.

7 The subgenres of the romance genre include gothic romance, historical romance, erotic romance, and mystery romance, which, following the romance formula, focus on emotional gradation.

8 Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 70.

9 Makinen, *Feminist Popular Fiction*, 24.

10 Carter and Atwood adopt the genre to challenge the conventional passivity of female characters presented in romance fiction as young, modest and virginal.

11 Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 52.

12 Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 55.

## Escapes from Marriage and Motherhood: Romance

According to the definition by Northrop Frye, the typical romance moves cyclically “down through the threatening complications and up again through the escape from them.”<sup>13</sup> Carter’s *Shadow Dance* can be read as a subverted romance, an anti-romance. Using a mocking form, the novel is set in a non-pastoral setting, where teenage lovers “moaned and writhed in the rhododendron bushes among the fag ends and dogshit.”<sup>14</sup> The scene of the dead ruins in *Shadow Dance* is, in Aidan Day’s terms, “symbolic of old, outdated cultural values.”<sup>15</sup> Some of these values overlap with the typical significance of the romance genre. These devastated values and orders, depicted as “decaying old house[s],”<sup>16</sup> include the workings of patriarchy and women’s subservience and passivity. The novel in its ironic treatment of the romance genre breaks all the typical taboos.<sup>17</sup> *Shadow Dance* clearly negates the structural elements of the typical romance: it is a chronicle not of the development of love but the development of obsession.

The story describes two male characters, Morris and Honeybuzzard, and three female characters, Ghislaine, Edna, and Emily. Ghislaine, who had had a sex-affair with both the men, has just returned from hospital after a knifing given to her by Honeybuzzard after Morris failed to have sex with Ghislaine. Edna is Morris’s wife and Emily is Honeybuzzard’s new girlfriend. The novel cannot be seen as a romance as such, but the story line of Edna and Morris and their relationship (especially from Edna’s point of view)<sup>18</sup> reflect (albeit in distorted ways) many of the elements of traditional romances. The motif of marriage and motherhood is taken over from romance, but here it has failed to produce its expected effect. Adopting the masculine plot of desire, Carter resists the romantic formula. Marriage, wifehood and motherhood (as the only denouement of the female experience in romance) are presented through an ironic twist of the required happy-end: “Edna thought marriage was for submission and procreation.”<sup>19</sup> Edna is seen as “a Victorian girl,”<sup>20</sup> with domestic interests such as knitting and jam-making, who “would be docile and obedient, because that was how wives should be”<sup>21</sup> and she longs for a child, “his children,”<sup>22</sup> showing that she can achieve happiness, as traditional heroines of romances, “only by undergoing complex process of

13 Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 131.

14 Angela Carter, *Shadow Dance* (London: Virago, 1980), 13.

15 Aidan Day, *The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 15.

16 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 13.

17 Janice Radway points out the taboos of the romance genre, which include rape, violence, and ‘bed-hopping’ of the female protagonist: there are “things that ‘should never appear in a romance [...] promiscuous sex, a sad ending, rape, physical torture and weak heroes have no place in the romance” (*Reading the Romance*, 73).

18 The novel is narrated from the third person point of view, but, mostly, it presents the male perspective. However, the male perspective is only one of many and it is “challenged and undermined by the wider interaction of voices within the text which also encourages the reader to regard it sceptically” (Peach, *Angela Carter*, Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 29). Linden Peach’s observation enables readers to concentrate on other voices (e.g. Edna’s) to parody the male focus. Thus, Edna can be seen as a cliché heroine of a romance and the male characters as comic versions of the Gothic villains – Honeybuzzard enjoys wearing false noses and false vampire teeth.

19 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 45.

20 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 45.

21 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 46.

22 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 22.

self-subversion, during which she sacrifices her aggressive instincts, her 'pride,' and nearly – her life."<sup>23</sup> Contrary to this, Emily, according to Aidan Day, rejects "the past and its patriarchal perversities."<sup>24</sup> Emily (together with Morris) discovers the body of the murdered doll-like Ghislaine. Anna Watz Fruchart compares Ghislaine to surrealist automata and concludes that "[t]he dolls, patched up like Ghislaine, confuse and conflate categories such as sexiness and innocence, childhood and adulthood, beauty and its destruction, eroticism, mutilation and death in a manner characteristic of surrealism."<sup>25</sup> It can be added that this is exactly how Carter crosses the conventions of the genre. By juxtaposing conflicting characteristics and values within and between characters, she liberates herself from the passive/active, male/female dichotomies which are typical for traditional romances.

Emily begins to voice her suspicion against Honeybuzzard, comparing him to Bluebeard and his murdered wives: "I found a key in one of his trouser pockets, see, and I thought, you know, of Bluebeard."<sup>26</sup> Emily at first seems to represent a naive and pretty doll-like character, "there was a dolly patch of bright pink in the centre of each round cheek."<sup>27</sup> However, she realizes Honeybuzzard's victimizing behaviour to women and, like Atwood's protagonist Marian, rebels against it by destroying Honeybuzzard's room in the junk shop: "The corset advertisements were ripped and torn from the walls and so were all the photographs and drawings [...] Broken in half, the bust of Queen Victoria rolled in the grate."<sup>28</sup> Emily transgresses the conventions of passive femininity, she is "a practical girl"<sup>29</sup> and decides to take care of herself and her unborn child.

It is not only Emily's rebellion against the old order which links her to the protagonist of Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman*. Another important analogy is created when Honeybuzzard, "[the] man [who] eats meat,"<sup>30</sup> talks about Emily, comparing her to a fruitcake: "My Emily is like nothing so much as the best fruitcake, the kind with rum in it that you can get drunk on. I gorge on her, like a baby at a party. Oh, my, oh, my."<sup>31</sup> The motif of cannibalism, significant in Atwood's *The Edible Woman* in connection to marriage and the wedding night, is typical of Carter's *Shadow Dance*. Juxtaposing the categories such as cannibalism and wedding, beauty and mutilation, sex and pain, enables Carter to stretch the conventions of the romance.

Like *Shadow Dance*, *The Edible Woman* is not constructed around a gradual progression toward a romantic wedding and a happy ending, but, as J. Brooks Bouson suggests, around "a frustrated movement away from romantic affiliation."<sup>32</sup> The novel begins as a traditional

23 Tanja Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (London: Routledge, 1982), 37.

24 Aidan Day, *The Rational Glass*, 19.

25 Anna Fruchart Watz, "Convulsive Beauty and Compulsive Desire," in *Re-visiting Angela Carter: Texts, Contexts, Intertexts*, ed. Rebecca Munford (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 24.

26 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 103.

27 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 54.

28 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 164.

29 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 104.

30 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 56.

31 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 59.

32 J. Brooks Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 17.

romance.<sup>33</sup> Marian is expected to get married to her fiancé, Peter. However, unlike a traditional romance, in which the couple overcome obstacles before reaching the stability of marriage, *The Edible Woman* is, instead, a mock-romance. Similarly, Fiona Tolan observes that the novel works “within the parameters of the genre whilst simultaneously subvert[ing] its conventions.”<sup>34</sup> Marian’s anxiety results from the typical romance requirement: her fiancé’s dominance over her and her fear of being consumed in marriage. Marian bakes a cake in a female shape to offer Peter “a substitute, something you’ll like much better.”<sup>35</sup> After Peter refuses it, she eats it herself, which produces a grotesque and ambiguous ending of the mock-romance. From a dish to be eaten, she becomes a consumer, as her friend Duncan tells her: “You’re back to so-called reality, you’re a consumer.”<sup>36</sup> Tolan reads the comic ending of the book as “a final acceptance of the bodily self; Marian no longer feels compelled to transcend the feminine, but is now able to internalize and assimilate the other within her self.”<sup>37</sup> Both of the possible explanations of the ambiguous resolution of the novel, however, suggest that *The Edible Woman* destabilizes the popular romance formula which, according to Tania Modleski’s examination, “insists upon and rewards feminine selflessness.”<sup>38</sup> Carter and Atwood in their rewritings of romances emphasize the dangerous and possibly pathological effects of the marriage models in traditional romances.

Carter and Atwood render the female fears which are inherent in the traditional romance plots. Like Tania Modleski suggests, romances reflect the need of women to “read” men, to “engage in a continual deciphering of the motives for the hero’s behaviour” and “the masculine enigma,”<sup>39</sup> which causes women’s anxiety and fear and is inherently significant for the genre. Carter and Atwood portray their male protagonists as good and simultaneously as bad and frightening. Morris in *Shadow Dance* is a typical ambiguous romance husband for Edna: “[...] she wanted a good husband who would truly need her and dearly value her; but failing that, a bad husband she could pride herself on loving all the same was her heart’s desire.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Atwood’s Peter fulfils the image of “nicely packaged” masculinity because he is very handsome.<sup>41</sup> And although Marian at first felt “the sense of proud ownership,”<sup>42</sup> later she is worried about finding out his hidden self. In *Brutal Choreographies*, Bouson asserts that “Marian fantasizes that Peter might secretly be the

33 Atwood’s re-visitation of the romance genre in her first novel is analysed by Eleonora Rao in *Strategies for Identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993). Rao observes that *The Edible Woman* “escapes the confines of the heterosexual romance plot” (*Strategies for Identity*, 5). “The Edible Woman as a Romance” is the title of Catherine McLay’s essay included in “The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism”, in *The Art of Margaret Atwood*, ed. Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson (Toronto: Anansi, 1981). Catherine McLay suggests that “Marian seems to alter very little from beginning to end” (123), while I think that Marian transforms herself from a victim/prey to a consumer.

34 Fiona Tolan, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 31.

35 Margaret Atwood, *Edible Woman* (London: Virago, 1980), 271.

36 Atwood, *Edible Woman*, 281.

37 Tolan, *Feminism and Fiction*, 34.

38 Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 36–37.

39 Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 34.

40 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 47.

41 Atwood, *Edible Woman*, 146.

42 Atwood, *Edible Woman*, 146.

Underwear Man, an obscene phone caller,<sup>43</sup> and Marian's obsession signals her anxiety and fear of becoming an object of consumption. The typical romance motif of the ambiguous good/bad man serves here to voice the danger of becoming the object of male desire, which, according to Bouson, "seeks to assimilate, and thus erase, the female self."<sup>44</sup> The threat of being complicit in Marian's collusion becomes significant in Atwood's critical revision of romance fiction: an entrapment in an unequal relationship. Marian refuses to be a conventional romance heroine whose "female individuality and sense of self are shown to be compatible with nurturance and care by another."<sup>45</sup> To Marian, the loss of self in Peter's gaze, as well as the prospects of motherhood, do not "fulfil" her "deepest femininity."<sup>46</sup>

In the same way Carter's heroine Emily, aware of the danger of becoming Honeybuzzard's object and victim of desire, refuses her role. When she finds out about Ghislaine's scar, she decides to leave Honeybuzzard, despite being pregnant. Unlike Marian, she is "glad about [her] baby"<sup>47</sup> and Honeybuzzard "had nothing to do with it."<sup>48</sup> Through this she shows her independence and strong individuality. Emily is in opposition to Edna, who, in my analysis, is closer to typical romance heroines. Unlike Ghislaine, Emily says: "[Honeybuzzard] could whistle for me for ever but I wouldn't come."<sup>49</sup> Her independent behaviour contrasts with Ghislaine's subordination.

In Carter's subversions of the conventional closure of the romance plot, her novel ends with Honeybuzzard's and Ghislaine's reunion in a sado-masochistic ritual: Ghislaine, resembling an extreme version of a passive romance heroine, comes to Honeybuzzard, saying: "I've learned my lesson, I can't live without you, you are my master, do what you like with me,"<sup>50</sup> and Honeybuzzard kills her. Atwood's mock-romance is resolved through the marriage of a different, not the central, couple. Bouson observes that "Atwood provides a postromantic critique of the conventional resolutions of the love story."<sup>51</sup> Her *The Edible Woman* refuses to provide the traditional wedding resolution. Instead, like Carter's *Shadow Dance*, it culminates in female revenge: Emily burns down Honeybuzzard's house full of Victorian props and Marian eats her own woman-cake.

Before the final resolution is reached, both heroines suffer from bodily discomfort: Emily is sick and vomits, unaware of being pregnant; Marian, unable to eat, is starving herself to death, but "at the thought of food her stomach contracted."<sup>52</sup> Their nausea predicts a failure of the romance plot, however, they actively find a way out of their destructive relationships: Emily, no longer "naïve as *Red Letter* or *True Romances*,"<sup>53</sup> calls the police to arrest Honeybuzzard; Marian articulates her anxiety and says to Peter: "You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you' [...] 'You've been trying

43 Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies*, 19.

44 Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies*, 20.

45 Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 55.

46 Atwood, *Edible Woman*, 41.

47 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 179.

48 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 179.

49 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 168.

50 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 166.

51 Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies*, 31.

52 Atwood, *Edible Woman*, 270.

53 Carter, *Shadow Dance*, 103.

to assimilate me.”<sup>54</sup> Not only do the heroines of Carter’s and Atwood’s texts rescue their lives, they are also rescued from the traditional romantic ideology, which elevates marriage as the only happy end of romance. Carter and Atwood rather mock the conventional romance plot and thus they reveal the menace of the traditional romance pattern: the objectification and self-erasure of women.

## Suicide and Fake Suicide: Gothic Escapes

The genre of the Gothic romance is one that Carter and Atwood have returned to frequently.<sup>55</sup> Both authors enter into the rules and conventions of the genre, traditionally associated with fear and mystery. Elaine Showalter recognizes that critical manifestations of the change of consciousness that resulted from the 1960’s women’s liberation movement “was the theorization of the Female Gothic as a genre that expressed women’s dark protests, fantasies, and fear.”<sup>56</sup> With the aim of discussing Carter’s and Atwood’s transgressions and experimentations across popular genre boundaries, this article examines their political revisions of this genre. In a postmodern manner, both authors revisit escapist popular genres to produce texts which encode the cultural and social themes of their times.

Carter’s and Atwood’s rewritings of the Gothic follow the specific fears and nightmares of the genre; however, they, paradoxically, juxtapose them with humorous elements. David Punter notes on Carter’s use of the Gothic genre: “Carter ironically suggests that the Gothic vision is in fact an accurate account of life, of the ways we project our fantasies onto the world and then stand back in horror when we see them come to life. This observation is valid in Atwood’s case too: the Gothic fears, bodily terror and anxieties, and the specific position of women in relation to them, in Carter’s as well as Atwood’s fiction, are disturbing because they resemble the reality of our world. Both writers use the elements of the Gothic throughout their writings, but this article concentrates only on two examples from their early novels: Carter’s *Love* (1971) and Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976). These two novels perfectly illustrate the Gothic elements. They feature ambiguous and fragile heroines seeking escape from male villains.

Through inversions of Gothic elements, Carter and Atwood create disturbing novels, sensitive to the dangers of reality. The protagonists are unable to articulate their fears and insecurities either verbally or in their art. By admitting the repressed desires and horrors, the characters could redefine themselves and take responsibility for their lives.

There are significant differences in Carter’s and Atwood’s treatment of the genre: Carter’s text is written in a (seemingly) realist and ironic mode, while Atwood’s gothic romance *Lady Oracle* uses, as Eleonora Rao observes, “the strategy of humour.”<sup>57</sup> In the tradition of the Gothic genre, both novels concentrate on their heroines, young and beautiful. Significantly, they avoid reality in

54 Atwood, *Edible Woman*, 271.

55 The term Gothic has been used in a broader context than the classical Gothic fiction, some of the new adoptions of the genre are quite different from its original practice. In *The Literature of the Terror: A History Of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*, David Punter observes that “one central meaning, however, it has retained: Gothic writing is not realist writing. And as non-realistic and broadly expressionist forms of fiction multiply in England and America, so has the term ‘Gothic’ become more prevalent” (London: Longman, 1980), 373.

56 Elaine Showalter, *Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women’s Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 127.

57 Rao, *Strategies for Identity*, 28.

their art: Annabel draws delicate pictures, while Joan is a writer. The female protagonists share the desire to escape the complications of their reality by planning their death. Annabel attempts and eventually commits suicide, while Joan only fakes her (accidental) death in the lake.

Carter and Atwood operate with Gothic conventions and turn them inside out in order to challenge the readers to confront their hidden desires and fears. Botting claims that postmodern Gothic, its playfulness and reconstruction of the past, resembles the artificiality and ambivalence of the Gothic written in the eighteenth century. He argues that “the play of fear and laughter has been inscribed in Gothic texts since their inception, and ambivalence that disturbs critical categories that evaluate their seriousness and triviality.”<sup>58</sup> In a similar way, these trends characterize Carter’s and Atwood’s writing in general.

In their writings, there are several Gothic elements both authors include: ambivalence, mystical atmosphere, and monstrosity. This type of genre is full of contradictions and ambivalence. It describes supernatural elements appearing in horrifying situations of pursuit or haunting. According to Botting, in Gothic fiction “good depends on evil, light on dark, reason on irrationality” and because of their coexistence, it is possible to define their limits: “[t]he contradictions undermine the project of attaining and fixing secure boundaries and leave Gothic texts open to a play of ambivalence, a dynamic of limit and transgression that both restores and contests boundaries.”<sup>59</sup>

However, this may not be entirely true of Carter’s and Atwood’s writings. But because both writers use open endings, which are often ambiguous, the readers can project their own moral expectations. The inability of the characters to distinguish between good and evil, reality and fiction, game and reality, makes the genre in Carter’s and Atwood’s hands more frightening than in the classical Gothic novels. It is not the typical Gothic setting of ruins and mediaeval castles which produces the atmosphere of horror; the fantastic landscape is not far from home any more. Moreover, there are no monsters in the traditional understanding of the word, but the monstrous characters live very close to the main characters: they are their mothers (in the case of *Lady Oracle*), brothers (in *Love*) or the characters themselves as they are unable to understand the consequences of their behaviour and they blur the boundaries between reality and dream, game and reality.

The Gothic atmosphere in Carter’s *Love* is palpable. The novel presents a triangle of two half brothers, Lee and Buzz,<sup>60</sup> and Annabel, Lee’s wife. Lee teaches at Bristol University, Buzz returns from his trip from North Africa and finds Lee living in their flat with Annabel, who is an art student. I agree with David Punter’s observation that “Annabel and the other characters are monsters, though not of their own choosing: monsters in that they are unable to perceive connections between action and consequence, between game and life – or death.”<sup>61</sup> Annabel is the most fluid character, “confronted by ambiguities.”<sup>62</sup> She does not have a stable sense of her self, her

58 Fred Botting, *The Gothic* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 168.

59 Botting, *The Gothic*, 8–9.

60 Both characters are intertextually linked with Honeybuzzard from *Shadow Dance*: Lee as the handsome and educated Honey; and Buzz, Lee’s “shadow,” as Linden Peach suggests in *Angela Carter* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 60.

61 David Punter, “Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine,” *Critique* 25, no. 4 (1984): 399, accessed February 18, 2017, doi: 10.1080/00111619.1984.9937803.

62 Angela Carter, *Love* (London: Vintage, 2006), 1.

imaginary world collides with reality and is populated with “fearful shapes.”<sup>63</sup> To Annabel there is “no apparent difference between the world outside and the world inside”<sup>64</sup> She also projects her fantasy onto her husband, Lee, seeing him as “a herbivorous lion” and “a unicorn devouring raw meat.”<sup>65</sup> Annabel fantasizes about Lee as dissolving, “she wished, gently, to reduce him to not-being.”<sup>66</sup> The objectification and victimization is mutual, suggesting a Gothic sado-masochistic pleasure. When Annabel and Lee play chess and he wins, she hits him: “He was breathless with weeping, a despicable object.”<sup>67</sup>

The above quotation corresponds to Linden Peach’s implication that in Carter’s re-use of the Gothic genre, “women are usually presented as preyed on men.”<sup>68</sup> Annabel objectifies Lee, by tattooing her name on his chest, she gives him “the status of any other object in her collection.”<sup>69</sup> Sarah Gamble sees the tattoo as “not the symbol of romance it seems, but a visible sign of his tie to Annabel, which is compounded not of love, but of mutual pain, manipulation and delusion.”<sup>70</sup> But Lee does not stop sleeping with other women, who also become obsessed with him. After Annabel sees Lee and his lover Carolyn, she tries to commit suicide. It is significant that her suicide results from her inability to distinguish between game and reality: before she went to watch her husband and his lover, she had borrowed Buzz’s ring to pretend she was invisible. Moreover, she fails to distinguish between spectacle and reality, because she thinks about the more effective props to hurt herself with. While she is preparing her suicide to hurt Lee – “[s]he went immediately to the bathroom to kill herself in private”<sup>71</sup> – Annabel is staging her own death. She fashions herself into a victim of tragic love, and, paradoxically, in doing so she plays an active role, unlike typical Gothic heroines.

Annabel is found by Buzz who seems to present the opposite male character to Lee. When having sex with Annabel, Buzz imagines her passive body after her suicide attempt “on a tiled floor with her blood welling out through the silk pores of her embroidered shawl while [...] Lee lay in some other woman’s bed. This idea alone filled him with desire.”<sup>72</sup> The objectified Annabel reflects “the perverse origins of his desire” and becomes “the role he had devised.”<sup>73</sup> Unable to become an autonomous subject, independent from Lee, she creates an object of her appearance “in the attempt to make herself the living portrait of a girl who had never existed.”<sup>74</sup> She becomes an object when she makes her final attempt at suicide. Because Lee spends the night with his pupil from school,

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63 Carter, *Love*, 3.

64 Carter, *Love*, 29.

65 Carter, *Love*, 34.

66 Carter, *Love*, 35.

67 Carter, *Love*, 40.

68 Peach, *Angela Carter*, 66.

69 Carter, *Love*, 68.

70 Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing From the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 87.

71 Carter, *Love*, 44–45.

72 Carter, *Love*, 90–91.

73 Carter, *Love*, 91.

74 Carter, *Love*, 100.

Joanne, Annabel kills herself: “now she was a painted doll, bluish at the extremities.”<sup>75</sup> She becomes a victim of her own fantasies and fears.

Annabel’s monstrosity is suggested several times. Lee thinks she “might not be fully human.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Aidan Day’s summing up of the story is that she “ends up as literally nothing” because she fails to “engage with reason and a rational definition of herself as a coherent, autonomous being.”<sup>77</sup> David Punter also comments on Annabel’s and other characters’ attempts to survive: “the characters do not struggle for self-realisation, or indeed for survival.”<sup>78</sup> In the Afterword to *Love*, Carter says that “even the women’s movement would have been no help to her.”<sup>79</sup> Annabel is a Gothic character, “a mad girl plastered in fear and trembling,”<sup>80</sup> suffering from terrible nightmares that she cannot distinguish from reality, attracted to “the Gothic north, where an ivy-covered tower with leaded ogive windows skulked among the trees.”<sup>81</sup> However, Annabel’s ambiguity and the brothers’ quasi-masculinity rewrite the conventions of the Gothic.

In Carter’s re-visitations of the Gothic, physical violence, (fe)male victimization, sexual fantasies and ambiguous fears encourage a more creative reading. Carter subverts stereotypes by emphasizing the horrifying consequences of engagement with uncontrolled desire, unreason and ambiguity. “In time, the principal actors (the wife, the brothers, the mistress) assembled a coherent narrative from these images but each interpreted them differently and drew their own conclusions which were all quite dissimilar [...]”<sup>82</sup> The author encourages the readers to enter into the narratives and draw new conclusions: the search for a conclusion, no less than the search for a coherent and autonomous self, is a traumatic journey.

Atwood’s protagonist Joan Forster in *Lady Oracle* undergoes a similar journey. She struggles to find a way out of the bizarre maze of her real life and the Gothic plots she writes. The undertone of Atwood’s novel is very different from Carter’s *Love*, which is written in the mode of tragedy. Annabel commits her third suicide after two failed attempts, but Joan Forster only fakes her death and so she becomes a caricature of a Gothic protagonist. The combination of laughter and fear produces a comic effect. Nevertheless, Atwood’s rewriting of the Gothic expresses “female desires and dreads [...] women’s urge toward self-discovery and self-assertiveness with self-doubts, between celebration of new social freedoms and women’s sense of not being free of traditional assumptions and myths about femininity.”<sup>83</sup> Like Carter’s Annabel, Joan is portrayed in her monstrosity. Fat in her girlhood, Joan becomes a thin beautiful woman searching for one perfect identity. Atwood’s approach to Freud’s *unheimlich* is parodic. Freud defines the uncanny as “nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been

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75 Carter, *Love*, 109.

76 Carter, *Love*, 33.

77 Day, *The Rational Glass*, 62.

78 Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, 399.

79 Carter, *Love*, 111.

80 Carter, *Love*, 3.

81 Carter, *Love*, 1.

82 Carter, *Love*, 42–43.

83 Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 64.

estranged only by the process of repression.”<sup>84</sup> Atwood’s Gothic *Lady Oracle* verbalizes anxieties, forbidden desires which are repressed because they are in conflict with social conventions. The thematic concerns of Carter’s *Love* and Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* are the blurred borders between the familiar and the strange, the fantastic and the real, the normal and the uncanny, which overlap with the thematic concerns of the Gothic. In contrast to Carter’s *Love*, Atwood’s novel articulates Gothic female dreads and, simultaneously, laughs about them:

I was never followed down lonely streets [...] It would have been like molesting a giant basketball, and secretly, though I treasured images of myself exuding melting femininity and soft surrender, I knew I would be able to squash any potential molester against a wall merely by breathing out.<sup>85</sup>

Atwood’s humour underlines the ambiguity of images of femininity that are simultaneously valued and endangering.

Joan indeed wants to embody a Gothic romance heroine, beautiful, virtuous and with “roses in her cheeks,”<sup>86</sup> but as she becomes fed up with her heroine Charlotte’s ‘perfection,’ she herself is unable to become her ideal self. Atwood rewrites the limits imposed on the genre of Gothic romances in portraying women as either good wives or manipulative seductresses: the ambiguity of Joan resembles then the ambiguity of Annabel in *Love*. Juliet Mitchell points out that “[psychoanalysis] reconstructs the unperceived, fragmented and incoherent myths and ideas held within the unconscious mind, it makes them coherent and presents them as what they are: myths, representations of ideas, ideology.”<sup>87</sup> In *Love* and *Lady Oracle*, the heroines make the journey to their unconscious, and both of them are entrapped by Gothic fears. Annabel dies and Joan, trying to bury her past identities, ironically, digs them up. Like Joan, Annabel creates her own way of seeing the past: “She invented her own connections between the past and the present.”<sup>88</sup> Escaping from Canada to London and later to Italy, Joan invents not only a new identity but also new memories of the past.

*Lady Oracle* consists of a frame text and a series of interlocking interwoven texts. The frame text is set in the present and takes place in Italy. Joan Forster’s private memories are embedded in this frame narrative, namely, her traumatic childhood experience of being a fat girl tormented by her friends; her problematic relationship with a demanding and neurotic mother. From fat she becomes thin, from London she returns to Toronto, from her aristocratic lover, Paul, she escapes to her radical husband, Arthur, to become confused by her own identities. Joan’s life is full of escapes and shocking surprises: after a fake suicide in the lake in Canada, she is born again in Italy.

The narrative, told by Joan Forster who is a writer, offers several versions of her life which never fit together. Eleonora Rao suggests that the “comic effect of the novel depends on the writer’s and reader’s shared assumption of a hierarchy of genres.”<sup>89</sup> Atwood challenges and, at the same time, confirms this hierarchy by constructing the main protagonist as a successful writer of

84 Sigmund Freud, *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper and Row Press, 1958), 148.

85 Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (London: Virago, 1982), 140.

86 Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 317.

87 Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 368–369.

88 Carter, *Love*, 96.

89 Rao, *Strategies for Identity*, 29.

Gothic fiction. Joan's life story is told alongside extracts from her Gothic romances which mirror her everyday life in a far more exciting and glamorous light. Joan applies the pre-constituted patterns of Gothic romances to the real world, and sometimes she is not able to tell the difference between them. Another parallel plot is expressed in her mythic 'Lady Oracle' poems, produced, as Joan believes, by Automatic Writing when she looks in a dark mirror.

The dark mirror becomes a central metaphor of Joan's series of escapes, transformations and fantasies. The mirror represents the tension between reality and reflection, reality and fantasy, reality and fiction, reality and deformation. The text multiplies reflections, it is a circus show in which the protagonists enlarge and shrink, become multiheaded or headless, become multiple or deleted. This is one of several images where Joan's mother is transformed into a three-headed monster: "I suddenly realized that instead of three reflections she had three actual heads, which rose from her towelled shoulders on three separate necks [...] my mother was a monster."<sup>90</sup> These transformations, as well as the shifting narrative frames, produce paradoxes and contradictory versions, but there are no clear boundaries between them. The gaps between Joan's fantasies are always riddles for the reader. From a fat and unattractive teenage girl, she transforms herself into a beautiful femme fatale.

Joan thus becomes an ambiguous Gothic heroine who, similar to Carter's Annabel, cannot distinguish between games and real-life consequences. Her fake suicide results in the arrest of her two friends who had helped her escape. She never takes responsibility for the consequences of her behaviour and always escapes by changing her name, appearance, country or boyfriend. Like Annabel, she is no longer able to tell the difference between her paranoia and reality: When she meets her first lover Paul, she sees him as a typical Gothic male character who takes on the roles of a villain and rescuer: "'Was this my lost love, my rescuer?'"<sup>91</sup> Following the line of Gothic heroines, Annabel from *Love* included, she suspects that her father murdered her mother, Joan accuses her husband of cheating on her; she thinks that her mother never wanted to have her.

Joan fears that a strange man who comes to Italy has come to kill her, but in fact, he only wants to interview her. He is a reporter and Joan tells him her story (the novel we are reading). Through telling her story, she is able to recognize her failures and decides to give up writing costume Gothic stories and come back to her real life. Joan is still unable to accept her former self and thus she is preparing another trick, suggested by her decision to turn to writing science fiction: "I won't write any more Costume gothics, though; I think they were bad for me"<sup>92</sup> looking for another escape from and to escapist literature. Joan says that she would return to Toronto but she is an obsessive liar and throughout her novel admits that the story she narrates to the reporter contains lies, although she claims there are "not very many" lies.<sup>93</sup> In Atwood's novel Joan has fabricated her own life. The reader and the narrator are entrapped in a parody of a Gothic plot with only fake escapes. It is apparent that Joan avoids examining her past selves too closely. She avoids her "buried" and repressed selves, which parodies the reconciliation between reality and fantasy in traditional Gothic novels.

90 Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 66–67.

91 Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 280.

92 Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 345.

93 Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 344.

## Conclusion

Through inversions of romances and Gothic elements, Carter and Atwood create disturbing novels, sensitive to the dangers of reality. The protagonists are unable to articulate their fears and insecurities actively but, by admitting their repressed desires and horrors, the characters could redefine themselves and take responsibility for their lives. Edna and Marianne suffer from bodily discomforts; Annabel and Joan are not able to read their repressed stories yet, which leads to their tragic ends: Annabel kills herself, Joan escapes to fantasy (again). Carter's and Atwood's early fiction protagonists are unable to put in words their hidden emotions of anger, hatred, and desire and they use bodily gestures of hysteria to escape the dominance of men. Suicides and weddings, literal or metaphorical, for conventional Gothic and romance heroines usually mean escapes. Carter's and Atwood's novels show that these escapes provide no closure and are therefore tragic (or comic), immature and temporary solutions.

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