Università Ca'Foscari Venezia

Master's Degree in
European, American and
Postcolonial Language and Literature

Final Thesis

Margaret Atwood's "Hairball": An Inquiry into a Transgressive Personality

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Abstract

In the short story "Hairball", Atwood presents the reader with an interesting main character, Kat, who hasn't received well-deserved attention and has been scarcely analysed by scholars throughout the years. This complex main character is openly and straightforwardly presented as transgressive throughout the narration, which is so compelling that the reader cannot but ask questions about its protagonist. In fact, after an initial reading of the short story it becomes immediately clear that the main character is both complex and intriguing, revealing traits of a transgressive personality that is craftily created to shock, to "go too far". However, the focus of the narration is not only on the personality of its main protagonist, but also on the creation of that specific personality and on the cultural implications of an unruly behaviour. These are as well the three macro topics that will be covered in this thesis.

Note: with the exception of note 95, all footnotes are for citational purposes only.

Introduction

> Evil women are necessary in story traditions for two much more obvious reasons, of course. First, they exist in life, so why shouldn't they exist in literature? Second – which may be another way of saying the same thing – women have more to them than virtue. They are fully dimensional human beings; they too have subterranean depths; why shouldn't their many-dimensionality be given literary expression?
>
> – Spotty Handed Villainesses, *Curious Pursuits*
> Margaret Atwood

Kat, the protagonist of "Hairball" is a transgressive woman that builds for herself a personality that revolves around the idea of exaggerating. Kat is also a woman that could be considered evil because she does not submit to patriarchally imposed models of behaviours, and a character that eludes the typical prescriptive representation of women in literature. The aim of this dissertation is to analyse Kat's personality construction in order to demonstrate how and to which extent her intentional transgressiveness can be considered the emblematic exemplification of both a literary theory and a cultural phenomenon.

The initial introductory chapter is useful to understand the context in which the short story was written and to map the Canadian symbolic canvas onto which it has to be read. A reflection on the title of the collection, the short story's relationship with the other short stories in the collection in which female figures are paramount and the theme of identity are the touchstones that inaugurate our interpretive trajectory.

The second chapter focuses on the exploration of the literary theories of the narrative view of identity construction, that allow the understanding of Kat's construction of a life narrative of a woman that defines herself "transgressive". During the course of the short story, the reader witnesses a progressive slicing down of Kat's name and personality that mirrors a gradual building up of a life narrative that is intrinsically transgressive. Therefore, in the second section of this chapter it will be possible to move away from theory to dive deep into a critical analysis of the text in which proofs of the intentionality of Kat's actions will be used as a starting point to be able to understand the foundations of her life narrative. Through the analysis of Kat's

behavioural patterns, with the help of the theories on the narrative view, it becomes clear that Kat's life narrative is not a healthy re-elaboration of lived time that provides the backbone of her personality, but it is a self-manufactured invention that after a difficult moment will become an obstacle rather than a benefit in Kat's life.

The theory of self-determination becomes particularly relevant in the light of feminism, and more generally when applied to a female character. Topics related to women and to the female body are particularly relevant for Atwood, that largely covered the issues related to what it means to be a woman, especially an unruly woman. In the third chapter as well, a theoretical framework on gender issues and a discussion on Atwood's own take on feminism will leave the spotlight to a critical analysis of the text, which is relevant to better understand the cultural implications of a story that focuses on the personal narrative and the unruliness of a woman that is both stereotypical and outrageous in her behaviour.

What becomes strikingly clear in the narration by the end of the short story is that the intentionality of Kat's action and her desire to shock will give way to a completely different version of herself, a version that is not yet completed, constructed, and that is nameless. This emblematic namelessness is the consequence of a revelation that Kat receives from her own body and the world surrounding it. In fact, Kat is not the only protagonist of the short story, that is titled after Hairball, an ovarian cyst that Kat's body produces. Hairball becomes the symbol of an emerging narrative of the self that does not include rage and transgressiveness but contemplates motherhood and domesticity. Hairball will become the driving motive behind Kat's re-elaboration of her life narrative that demonstrates how relevant it is for women to be honest with themselves and accept the desires coming from the depths of their bodies, even if this means that they have to come to terms with societal stereotypical impositions.

1. *Wilderness Tips*

1.1 The Collection

With more than forty years of literary production, Margaret Atwood is one of the greatest Canadian contemporary authors, holding dozens of awards and continuously producing literature in the form of poetry, novels, short stories, non-fiction, and even television scripts. She began writing at the age of five, and by the age of sixteen she realised that writing was "the only thing [she] wanted to do".[1] However, not only writing fiction in Canada in the fifties wasn't a female possibility, but it was actually no one's prerogative.[2] In fact, Canada has not been a country with a national literary identity until recently, and scholars over the years have fought to create a canon for Canadian literature since the end of World War II. Following the publication of the first two collection of literary works by Canadian authors, the *New Canadian Library* in 1957 and the *Literary History of Canada* in 1965, the canonization began with the clear identification of the values that were, and remain nowadays, connected to the values that Canadians forward in literature. It is possible to talk about a canon that has been produced top-down since the model for Canadian literature did not develop over the years, but it is the result of an academic selection of writings that provide to the world the image that Canadians have of themselves, an exemplification of their values and their history.[3] It is especially with the conclusion of the *Literary History of Canada*, by Northrop Frye, that the debate on Canadianness and Canadian canon became a subject of discussion. With this project, Frye created a romanticised representation of Canadian literature while commenting on what will become the pillars of the literary history of the country, such as the concept of the Garrison

[1] David Staines, "Margaret Atwood in Her Canadian Context," in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13.

[2] Lorraine York, "Biography/Autobiography," in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 30.

[3] Robert Lecker, "The Canonization of Canadian Literature: An Inquiry into Value," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 3 (1990): 656–71, https://doi.org/10.1086/448552.

mentality and the quest for a peaceable land,[4] that he will further develop later in the years, reaching the notorious rhetorical question "where is here?" that connects the land to the contradictions inherent in Canadian culture.

It is since the beginning of her career that Atwood tried to map her version of Canada going back to the life of pioneers and their relationship with the land, comparing it to today's relationship that Canadians entertain with the land they inhabit. As we have just said, the work of Northrop Frye initiated the mapping of Canadianness in the literary critical field connecting the individual to the nation, and the nation to its natural environment,[5] but it is with *Survival* (1972) that Atwood creates the connection between victimhood and Canada and inaugurates the era of a literary Canadian criticism.

Atwood's literary production over the years expanded and varied, though remaining focused on the representation of Canada as a land and a nation, and on the portrayal of women's lives in a male dominated world. Those became her major topics, which have been treated both in fiction and in non-fiction. Among her rich literary production, the collection *Wilderness Tips* and, more specifically the short story "Hariball" is the main focus of the first part of this thesis.

Margaret Atwood's short story "Hairball" has been published in *The New Yorker* in 1990, and only a year later it has been included in the collection *Wilderness Tips*. The collection as per itself is already interesting to define, both for its construction and for its title, but it hasn't received well deserved attentions by critics and scholars, similarly to the short story "Hairball".

The title of the collection is strictly connected with Atwood's view of Canada as a land that has features of its own. Canada is represented in the short stories collection as a land in which two different concepts live side by side, in which the life in cities stands in sharp contrast with the life in nature. In Canadian imagination, nature is neither picturesque or sublime in Burke's terms, nor romantic or salvific as in

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[4] Robert Lecker, "'A Quest for the Peaceable Kingdom': The Narrative in Northrop Frye's Conclusion to the Literary History of Canada," *PMLA* 108, no. 2 (1993): 283–93.

[5] B. A. St. Andrews, "The Canadian Connection: Frye/Atwood," *World Literature Today* 60, no. 1 (1986): 47–49.

Wordsworth's imagination,[6] but it is a wild place that is able to kill, uncontaminated, threatening, and scary.

Thanks to the juxtaposition of the words "wilderness" and "tips" in the title of the collection, the two concepts can hardly be taken at face value. That is because "tips" are the epitome of what is not to be found in the "wild", but also the "wild", considered as unknown and unmapped, loses its intrinsic meaning in connection with the semantic field that "tips" evokes, that of the small helpful suggestion.[7] The oxymoronic title could thus be read as the representation of the wild as dominated by the idea of having tips at hand to domesticate it, reminiscence of a past in which pioneers tried to conquer their place in an uncontaminated threatening land. Conversely, if the prominence is given to the world "tips" as a verb, there is yet another concept to evaluate, which emerges at the end of the short story that borrows its title from the collection itself, "Wilderness Tips". In that instance, "wilderness" appears slanted to the eyes of one of the protagonists of the short story, who is dipping in the lake after having discovered the latest betrayal of her husband and hasn't decided yet on whether that wilderness that is tipping represents for her a new beginning or an imminent death.[8] Furthermore, several romanticised versions of "wild" appears to tip out of the protagonists of the stories in the collection as unexplored sides of themselves that begin to emerge and need to be addressed. In particular, in "Hairball" a strong prominence is given to the tips that Kat dispenses to the readers of the magazine for which she works. The tips are empty, but they nevertheless come from her transgressive mind, and thus are explicitly thought to educate the reader to be wild, as wild as Kat is. Moreover, the short story itself can be considered as a tip, a cautionary tale revised to create a feminist metaphor. Kat's story should be able to teach women that they need to learn to negotiate the boundaries of wild personalities in order to reconnect with their inner selves and their desires.

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[6] Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 2012th ed. (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc., 1972), 41–67.

[7] Arnold E. Davidson, "Negotiationg Wilderness Tips," in *Approaches to Teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Other Works*, ed. Sharon R. Wison, Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Henger (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1996), 180.

[8] Davidson, 180–81.

In “Wilderness Tips” the setting of the story is very different from the one in “Hairball”: Portia is in a cabin in the middle of the wild that up to that moment was the sacred place in which her husband never dared to cheat on her. However, the teaching behind this story is similar to the one that “Hairball” provides, but it is connected to the idea of the wild as a sacred place. Portia realises that even her safe place has been contaminated by patriarchal narratives about women, and the story comes to suggest that women should learn how to reappropriate that territory by reflecting on their inner selves and on the roles that were assigned to them. Therefore, both characters through different insights manage to reach new awareness about themselves and the society that surrounds them.

The many re-discovered and re-written narratives of female protagonists are among the things that permit to agree with the reflection that Reingard M. Nischik does on this collection. In fact, he states that it is very different from Atwood’s previous ones, and he comments that

> The “untold stories” in the protagonists’ lives come to the surface more often. The characters admit their existential needs more readily, both to themselves and to others, and have a greater ability to transcend catastrophes in their lives, achieving at least the suggestion of a “fresh beginning”.[9]

An invisible string connects the short stories in the collection and goes far beyond the concepts behind the title creating an overall structure that is important as much as the singular stories. The ten short stories create what could be called a poetical system in which every story is connected to the other which is placed in the diametrical opposite position in the collection. Furthermore, the short stories envisioned as an ensemble of individual narrations create a dialogical universe in which the stories dialogue on several layers and with different voices, producing a whole complex of

[9] Reingard M. Nischik, “Margaret Atwood’s Short Fiction and Shorter Stories,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 150.

meanings that are both socially located and more influential than the meanings conveyed by the singular stories.[10]

"Hairball", the second short story in the collection, which is the focus of this thesis, appears to be in direct connection with the second to last story, "Wilderness Tips". The interrelationship becomes evident as far as the final emotional conditions of the protagonists are involved, being both on the brink of a change that figuratively takes them back to their childhoods.[11] Both women are represented in a significant moment that will divide their lives in a "before" and an "after"[12] a revelation that has the potential to create a different version of themselves and that they are about to include in their life's narratives.

1.2 "Hairball"

The story is told through a third-person narrative situation called "figural narration" that features an invisible heterodiegetic narrator. The narration is dominated by the internal perspective of a reflector-character[13] that coincides with the main character of the story, its protagonist Kat. The invisible narrator's voice comes from the outside of the story, and its public voice allows the creation of a parallel between Kat's story, which is being narrated, and the story of any other woman. In fact, her story becomes so plausible that could potentially represent the story of any other woman reader. The fact that ideas and actions are told through a reflector character might have some effects on the trustworthiness of the story, however there is no reason

[10] Liliia Kuchmarenko, "M. Atwood's Wilderness Tips as a Dialogical Narrative" (2019); Patrick Williams, "Dialogism," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, 2005, 104–5.

[11] Davidson, "Negotiationg Wilderness Tips," 184–85.

[12] Kuchmarenko, "M. Atwood's Wilderness Tips as a Dialogical Narrative," 13.

[13] Franz K. Stanzel, "Second Thoughts on 'Narrative Situations in the Novel': Towards a 'Grammar of Fiction,'" *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 11, no. 3 (1978): 247–64, https://doi.org/10.2307/1344963.

to question Kat's credibility, since the focus of the narration is an account of her truth, her emotional life, her feelings and her inner struggles.[14]

The reader follows Kat's actions and line of thoughts in two distinct temporal lines, one represented by the account of her life ahead of the surgery, and one represented by her home recovery in the company of her ovarian cyst. In the story, past and present continuously alternate to allow the distinction between the events in the recent past that already went through some kind of re-elaboration, and the events that are happening in her present tense and on which she doesn't have the privileged position of retrospection. As Nischik noticed, a number of stories in this collection are told retrospectively, reinterpreted and interiorised as formative moments.[15]

Since the very beginning of the narrative, it is quite explicit that this story puts a woman and her life at the centre of the narration. However, Kat is a woman that behaves oddly, a woman that is unruly. In "Spotty Handed Villainesses" Atwood discusses the creation of female characters that have a bad behaviour and highlights how the literary figure of the woman who did not conform to the chaste, silent and obedient distressed princess in need of saving was automatically labelled as evil.[16]

> Female characters who behave badly can of course be used as sticks to beat other women […] But female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face. They can be explorations of moral freedom.[17]

The feminist tradition recently liberated some topics that were previously excluded from the creation of literature, but it also allowed to change the definition of "bad". The protagonist of "Hairball" appears to be fitting in this discourse. In fact, she is a character that behaves badly, but also a character that is not, per se, evil. She is

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[14] Sara Töttrup, "The Complexity of the Female Role: A Study of Margaret Atwood's Short Stories Wilderness Tips, Hairball, True Trash and The Bog Man" (HÖGSKOLAN I HALMSTAD, 2006), 22.

[15] Nischik, "Margaret Atwood's Short Fiction and Shorter Stories," 151.

[16] Margaret Atwood, "Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature," in *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writings 1970-2005*, 2006th ed. (London: Virago Press, 2005), 171–86.

[17] Atwood, 8.

transgressive, though not “bad”. Her transgressiveness will be explored further on in light of the traditional narrative view, however it is worth mentioning in this context.

As mentioned above, the narration of the short story is presided over by a narrator that reports for the reader the actions and thoughts of the reflector character, Kat. The tone of the story reflects Atwood’s typical irony, that is conveyed by the narrator’s spelling out of details coming from Kat’s mental mechanisms, and thanks to Kat’s highly ironic comments. Sarcasm, a prevalently male feature as opposed to female feelingness, is predominant in this short story.[18] The emotional distress is disregarded and substituted with irony, symbolically suggesting her need to be strong, unemotional, to be able to survive in a male dominated world and job environment. Nevertheless, irony is suddenly suspended when the character is suffering, accentuating the possibility for the reader to empathise with the protagonist. I would argue that this happens especially in the moment in which Kat decides to send Hairball, all dressed up, to Ger. Kat performs a vengeful and irony-charged act, however there is no irony in the account of what she does. The unromanticised description of her action conveys the sense of urgency that this act has on Kat, who is not guided by reason, but feelings. The anger is nothing more than a reaction to pain, and straightforwardness takes on the place of irony, allowing the reader to recognise Kat’s revenge as emotive. The reader comes to justify her action in the light of her pain, and thus might empathise with her.

Empathy becomes central in foregrounding a response by the reader, that could potentially bring teachings coming from literature in the real world. Although there is not much evidence that empathy alone could generate changings in the real world[19], it has become part of the feminist agenda to display patterns of female oppression in literature. As in the majority of her literary production even in this short story Atwood also makes large use of the carnivalesque degradation of elevated subjects through the

[18] Töttrup, “The Complexity of the Female Role: A Study of Margaret Atwood’s Short Stories Wilderness Tips, Hairball, True Trash and The Bog Man,” 20.

[19] Laura Fisher, “Between Oneself and the Other: Empathy, Dialogism, and Feminist Narratology in Two Novels by Margaret Atwood” (Macquarie University, 2015), 7.

use of low or trivial elements.[20] This is especially represented in the anthropomorphised Hairball, that has conversations with Kat. The tumour was eliminated from Kat's body, but is still part of her life, it is presented as if watching her from the mantel. Furthermore, the author also makes use of the references to the alimentary and sexual consumption that is rooted in patriarchal culture. Kat compares Hairball to a coconut, and herself to a KitKat, a chocolate bar that "melts in your mouth". Both might serve as a prediction of the exhaustibility of commodities, but the second one seems to be a clear metaphor for the commodification of women and their role in that process.[21]

Although the ending stays open as well as many of the endings of the short stories in *Wilderness Tips*, Atwood guides the reader toward an interpretation of the final namelessness of the protagonist of "Hairball". In fact, it is possible for an attentive reader to reconstruct the mechanisms at work in Kat's mind, and see the refusal to participate in gender inequalities, carrying on a plan of revenge that will set her free by exposing untold stories about society and herself.[22]

The inquiry into the reasons behind the process of change in Kat's personality is precisely the driving force of this inquiry into the main character of "Hairball", who is straightforwardly described as a transgressive woman who goes "way too far".[23] The story portrays its female protagonist, Kat, in a moment of disruption in her life narrative, which is completely changed after a surgical operation to remove an ovarian cyst, "a large one".[24] At first, the plot of the story is easily recognisable, and points in the direction of a canonical story about female misconduct in which an unruly woman is punished for her behaviour. However, Atwood does not conform to the canon and expands the plot with unexpected twists.

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[20] Marta Dvorak, "Margaret Atwood's Humor," in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 115.

[21] Dvorak, 115.

[22] Nischik, "Margaret Atwood's Short Fiction and Shorter Stories," 51.

[23] Margaret Atwood, "Hairball," in *Wilderness Tips*, 2010th ed. (London: Virago Press, 1991), 41. From this point onward, every reference to "Hairball" will be from this edition.

[24] Atwood, 39.

According to Yael Shapira, Atwood's short story can be envisioned as a tale that connects women's disgusting bodies to their misconduct, warning about the dangers of female transgression.[25] Kat happens to meet both criteria, behaving unmindful of conventions and having a body that produces something disgusting, Hairball. Therefore, this can be considered a story in full grotesque mode, in which the monstrous comes from within the woman and sustains Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on the female body as an entity that is continuously changing, never stable.[26] It is not only Kat's body that is not stable, but her mind is unstable as well, forcing her to reconsider her way of life. However, "Hairball" can be also considered as one among Atwood's texts that rewrites the myth of the unruly woman by adding a female perspective to a fabula that could otherwise be easily turned into a canonical cautionary tale. The ending of the short story, in fact, overturns the canon by accommodating in the plot the theme of female revenge in a narrative "about women's own experiences".[27]

The story is a representation that there is a cost for rebellion[28], and in Kat's world this cost is represented as a medical crisis that develops in a crisis in her life. The cost of her rebellion is a void in her existence created by an altered life narrative that uncovers hidden plots, bringing to light motifs that she did not consider up to the moment of disruption. In her personal life Kat paid the price of several abortions to play the part of the transgressive woman, but Hairball unearths sentiments connected to a desire for marriage and maternity. On the other hand, in her professional life, she realises that she is no more than a commodity that is disposed of once she is not useful anymore. Both prices are connected to a predominant male environment that is holding the knife when she is stabbed at her back.

Thus, the analysis of this short story will be divided in two macro themes, the first about the production of autobiographical material in relation to the narrative view

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[25] Yael Shapira, "Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque," *Narrative* 18, no. 1 (2010): 52, https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.0.0035.

[26] Shapira, 52; Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources," in *Rabelais and His World*, ed. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 317.

[27] Shapira, "Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque," 52.

[28] Shapira, 63.

of life, and the second in relation to the figure of the female liberated woman. The two topics are interrelated and intersect exactly on Hairball, the ovarian cyst that gives its name to the short story. Hairball is anthropomorphised by Kat, and throughout the narration comes to be a symbol of both her purposely fashioned unruliness and of her distance from the canonical woman, but also of her newly discovered desire for motherhood that suddenly has to be included in her life narrative. The choice of distinguishing the two macro topics is imposed by the need to clarify the principles of the narrative constructions of the self, that will become useful firstly in the second chapter to understand Kat's creative impulse on her life and on the life of others, and secondly, in the third chapter, to understand how patriarchal impositions became part of women's narratives of the self, limiting their possibilities and relegating them into gendered roles.

2. Who doesn't love a good story?

When approaching a book, whatever that may be, the reader expects to know everything about it. The first basic concerns are learning who the story is about, and what is the story that they have to tell. Readers are used to the idea that words create stories, which are craftily authored into narratives. Literature has taught readers to believe that characters are paper people modelled on real human beings with feelings and ideas and stories to tell, generated by the pen of a master puppet, the author.

When meeting new people, whoever they might be, we expect to know something about them. The first basic concerns are learning their name, and who they are. We expect to hear a series of information that allow us to create a general idea of who they are. The more you get to know them, the more the information acquired will be personal, intimate, explanatory of their behaviours. According to many psychologists and literary theorists, what we hear is a story, a narrative that is not written and that does not have a third-party author that takes on the role of the master puppet. The story that we hear is self-authored by the person we just met, it is generated thanks to the re-elaboration of a series of personal recollections of experiences and events.

The generally accepted theory about human beings is that we are narrativizing creatures, that is to say that we tend to describe ourselves and our lived time in narrative form. In fact, literature does not boast leadership in telling stories, on the contrary, it can be considered one of the latest product of humans' narrative minds. Way before literary products were born, human activities involved the creation of stories.[29] According to Cometa, cave art by *Homo Sapiens* were already examples of the narrativizing nature of humans,[30] as much as the pretend-play game performed by children of all times, in which they imagine situations and personalities for the protagonists of their games.[31] A narrative becomes therefore not only the story that we read in literature, but everything that has ever being told, including the accounts of

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[29] Michele Cometa, *Perchè le storie ci aiutano a vivere*, 2017, 25.

[30] Cometa, 17–60.

[31] Cometa, *Perchè le storie ci aiutano a vivere*, 25; Jonathan Gottschall, *L'istinto di narrare: Come le storie ci hanno resi umani*, 2012, 24-25.

what historically happened that we can read in history books.[32] Humans' narrative tendency influenced and shaped the development of our own cognitive skills, and opened the doors to the creation of both reality as we know it, and the creation of the self.[33] As Cometa and many before him argued, narrative and fiction have a decisive and significant role in the development of the child and of his cognitive functions[34], but humans never abandon what he calls the "narrative tendency". Stories function as compasses that help us shaping moral and intellectual tendencies and show us the world and its possibilities.[35] Therefore, the ability to narrativize affects the experiences that humans have of the world and of themselves. In fact, narrative is not only "the essential condition of experiencing the world, but also of understanding ourselves".[36]

Scholars from different fields from psychologists, to cognitive archaeologists to literary theorists, tackled the tendency of human beings to narrativize their lives, sometimes comparing it to a human strategy of self-protection, self-control and self-definition.[37] Furthermore, they also asserted that narrative changed and evolved, becoming an instrument to share knowledge and build communities, among other functions.[38]

A significant part of this study is based on the idea that "we have no other way to describe lived time save in the form of narrative"[39]. In his studies, Jerome Bruner also endorses Polkinghorne when he states that we do not only talk about our experiences in narrative form, but we also

> …achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression

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[32] Gottschall, *L'istinto di narrare: Come le storie ci hanno resi umani*; Marya Schechtman, "Memory and Identity," *Philosophical Studies* 153, no. 1 (2011): 75, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-010-9645-6.

[33] Cometa, *Perchè le storie ci aiutano a vivere*, 17–60.

[34] Cometa, 29.

[35] Samantha Vice, "Literature and the Narrative Self," *Philosophy 78*, no. 303 (2003): 98, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819103000068.

[36] Vice. 94.

[37] Cometa, *Perchè le storie ci aiutano a vivere*, 32.

[38] Cometa, 45.

[39] Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991): 692.

> of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives.[40]

This is a claim that Bruner takes further on in his "Life as Narrative" and will be discussed in the next chapter. Meanwhile, it becomes necessary to clarify an important distinction following the above-mentioned thread of concepts about the narrative tendency of human beings and their narrative capacity — humans *are* narratives in their conceptions of the selves, and humans *experience* life as a narrative.[41]

This chapter opened with a strong parallelism between characters and people, but it is important not to merge the two categories together. Although the similarity might be useful to test the waters of narrative constructivism, it is important to keep in mind that characters are not people, and people are not characters. However, the difference between the two is not in the narrative form of what they do, but in the degree of authorship they have on that narrative form.[42] Characters have a master puppet moving the strings of both their stories and of their personalities, and as it will be possible to see later in this chapter, literary forms of narratives are to be read against some fixed structures, both theorised by the Russian Formalists, and later by literary theorists. Clearly this is not the same mechanism at work in people's lives, who, being real and in control of their mental faculties can self-author their own personalities, their own life stories, their own memories, their own narratives. The main difference is therefore that while characters are authored, people are the authors of their own selves and their stories. Nevertheless, it is also important to keep in mind that people are slaves to rules as much as fictional characters are. In fact, if characters and their stories need to follow the canons of literature, people as well have the obligation to follow rules that do not belong to narrative theory, but that belong to cultural constraints.

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[40] Bruner, in Vice, "Literature and the Narrative Self," 99.

[41] Vice, 96.

[42] Vice, 99.

To sum up, it is possible to say that characters are representations of humans in the hands of an author. Humans are the authors and the protagonists of the stories they tell both to themselves as to others. The narrative view follows the basic principle that humans are characters on the stage of a play that is life, reality.

Life and art are therefore two inseparable spheres of influence, that in the light of the theories of the narrativization of life can be joint together by an invisible string that allows interchanges among the two parts.

2.1 Narrative construction

It has always historically been of great interest for scientist to discover the truth about the world that surrounds us humans, but the interest on the workings of the mind came with the Enlightenment. Descartes, Locke, Hume, Leibniz were only a few of those who investigated the workings of the human mind. They were not scientists but philosophers, and they began to tackle the issue very differently according to their primary interest.[43] Some investigated the workings of the mind in relation to the knowledge of reality, some focused on discovering how we know the things we know. This interest developed over time, and more recently the world has witnessed a deep interest in psychology, and in the workings of the mind as an instrument in the creation of reality.[44]

The most important thing to understand is the concept of narrative. Narrative is that mechanism which provides the solution to a fundamental problem of our species, the

> problem of how to translate the knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures that are generally human rather than cultural-specific.[45]

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[43] Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," 1.

[44] Bruner, 5.

[45] Martin Kreiswirth, "Narrative Turn in the Humanities," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (Routledge, 2005), 378.

If this is the definition that the word "narrative" acquired after the narrative turn in literary theory, it is necessary to dive into the notion of narrative view to re-emerge with a more specific definition of this word. Scholars of the narrative view consider narrative as a sequence of organised memories of happenings and events that are organised and re-elaborated in the mind to make sense of the world that humans experience. Humans seek coherence when trying to understand the world and the self, positioning relevant information and events in a line of continuity between them, thus creating a structure that is narrative in form.[46]

In this context, to understand better which kinds of narrative the human mind produces it is necessary to distinguish between the narrative construction of the experience and the narrative construction of the self, one which is oriented toward the external world, and one that is directed inward. According to scholars the two can actually be considered as two faces of the same coin, this amounts to the so-called narrative view.

On the one hand, the narrative construction of experience considers the use of narration as a lens through which it is possible to see the world, and the way of talking about it "becomes so habitual that [narratives] become recipes for structuring experience itself".[47] Before analysing how the mind builds our own personal versions of reality in connection to the happening in our lives, it also becomes interesting to analyse in depth how narrative is constructed. In 1991 Jerome Bruner published an essay called "The Narrative Construction of Reality", which identifies ten features of the construction of reality according to narrative principles. He maintains that there are two ways of constructing knowledge, one which is paradigmatic, more logical and scientific, in which data help crossing out the faulty theories, and one in which narratives help in the construction of a truth that is plausible.[48] The latter is the theory upon which he constructs his ideas.

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[46] Vice, "Literature and the Narrative Self," 95.

[47] Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," 93.

[48] José González Monteagudo, "Jerome Bruner and the Challenges of the Narrative Turn," *Narrative Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (2011): 297, https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.21.2.07gon; Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," 4.

> Narratives are versions of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and "narrative necessity" rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness although ironically we have no compunction in calling stories true or false.[49]

According to him, narratives are "versions of reality", which implies that the realities constructed through narrative are not univocal, but they change according to the interpretation that the individual mind gives to them.

Bruner proceeds to outline ten features of narrative that are paramount for understanding his theory, specifying that they are concerned with how narrative "operates as an instrument of the mind in the construction of reality" [50].

The ten features, drawn from Bruner's "The Narrative Construction of Reality", can be summarised as:

1. Narrative diachronicity: it specifies how time is represented in a narration. In fact, time in narrative does not flow as time in reality, and there are many conventions, such as flashback, flashforwards, and temporal synecdoche to render the durativity of lived time in narrative.
2. Particularity: narrative uses particular happenings. The suggestiveness of the story is connected to the emblematic nature of those particulars.
3. Intentional state entailment: narratives are about people acting. That means that the events that are inserted in a narrative have to be relevant to the narrative itself. However, the narrative does not provide any interpretation, it only provides the tools for interpreting what is happening in the story that is being told.
4. Hermeneutic composability: a text works in two directions, as it expresses a meaning, and it exists for someone to extract that meaning.
5. Canonicity and breach: not every sequence of events form a narrative. To be worth telling, a sequence of events must be organised as if it has something to say. There must be a canon that the narrative breaches to become worth telling, worth analysing, and worth interpreting.
6. Referentiality: narrative truth can be judged by similitude, not through verifiability.

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[49] Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," 4–5.

[50] Bruner, 6.

7. Genericness: narratives must be identifiable in genre, as the genre limits the hermeneutic task of interpretation.
8. Normativeness: since narratives breach canons, there is also a need for a canon. Bruner refers to the pentad designed by Burke, in which there is an agent, an act, a scene, a purpose, and agency. The balance of the pentad is called ratio, and the imbalance is the trouble, the breach in the conventions.
9. Context sensitivity and negotiability: it permits cultural negotiation, which is what makes possible coherence and interdependence.
10. Narrative accrual: narratives are generated in great numbers, and the sum of them makes possible the creation of a culture, a history, a tradition.

The mere presence of these features indicates that, as Bruner said, "life as led is inseparable from a life as told"[51]. There would, in fact, be no need and no possibility to sketch out the rules that dominate the narrative construction of reality if it existed another way to talk about lived time that is not in the form of a narrative. Those narratives, of course, are subject to constraints that are both cultural and tied to the reality of the world as it has been univocally discovered to be.

On the other hand, when considering the other side of the coin, it is more difficult to understand the way in which, according to the narrative view, humans build their own inner selves. There is a first basic assumption that should be taken for granted in this discourse, that is the idea that literary theory and narrative view are not concerned in the content of the singular life narratives[52], they are in fact interested in explaining the concept behind it and its features.

To begin with, it is possible to draw a line in the middle of the topic of the narrative conception of the self, which separates the implicit from the explicit self-narrative.[53] The first is an underground narrative that allows the constitution of a person by granting narratives about "moral responsibility, prudential interest, relations

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[51] Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research* 71, no. 3 (2004): 708.

[52] David Lumsden, "Narrative Construction of the Self," *Te Reo* 56–57 (2001): 8.

[53] Marya Schechtman, "Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 60 (2007): 171, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511627903.009; Vice, "Literature and the Narrative Self," 96–97.

of compensation and related person-specific activities"[54]. It is therefore an underlying psychological mode of thinking, a moral compass and a cultural tool kit that allows the person to function. The latter is the constructible part of the self, which sees identity as the sum total of the re-elaborated memories of events and happenings of the past. Bruner proposes a reading of the explicit self-narrative as a "selective achievement of memory recall".[55] Explicit identity is thought to be constituted of autobiographically relevant memories.[56] However, not all memories are constitutive of personal identity[57], as they are filtered by means of selection, cancellation and amplification.

Given its changeable nature, it is never possible in the construction of the self to consider the autobiography of the person as an object that is fully finished, or neither, as Lumsden suggests, as a finished construction made of Lego™ blocks[58]. The self has to be considered as something that is continuously constructed[59], that is never stable[60] because it continuously gathers memories that might be relevant for its own construction.

The idea that time passes and the person accumulates experiences is very important because it helps crystallising the idea that the singular narrative of the self is a continuous work in progress. Furthermore, since identity is not stable, to consider the identity of a person you have to section it in "time-slices" frozen in a specific moment in time.[61] Thus, a self is a collection of past selves not only in the cumulative sense, but also in a stage-of-life sense. A single time slice is representative of a specific personality in a determined moment, composed of the previous selves, but always on the verge of changing. As suggested by Schechtman, identity can be considered both "at a time" and "through time", and the two cannot be divorced.[62]

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[54] Schechtman, "Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View," 171.

[55] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 693.

[56] Schechtman, "Memory and Identity," 70.

[57] Schechtman, 70.

[58] Lumsden, "Narrative Construction of the Self," 6–7.

[59] Lumsden, 8.

[60] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 694.

[61] Lumsden, "Narrative Construction of the Self," 10.

[62] Lumsden, 10–13.

As much as some features can be drawn and followed as general rules in the narrative construction of experience, it is possible to trace some features in the narrative construction of the self as well. Since we constitute our life by forming narratives around which we organise our lives, it is paramount that the narrative of a mentally stable person does not derange from the "reality constraint" and the "articulation constraint".[63] As a matter of fact, Schechtman underlines the idea that narratives of the self must follow the rules of what is generally accepted as *real* "about the basic character of reality and about the nature of persons".[64] This means that one cannot construct a version of reality in which humans have two functioning hearts inside their bodies. Naturally that is possible in literature, but nevertheless an idea as such must follow the reality constraint of the story as envisioned by the author. Furthermore, Schechtman also adds that the self-narrative must be capable of being articulated[65], but also that the story we tell about ourselves must make psychological sense.[66] Vice is apparently not a supporter of every side of Schechtman's theory, in fact she endorses the first two ideas but retains some doubts about the third. The greatest disagreement between Vice and Schechtman emerges with Schechtman's assumption that the narrative view is "the lens through which we filter our experience and plan for actions, not a way we think about ourselves in reflective hours".[67] According to Vice the narrative view emerges exactly when we are in our reflective hours, because that is a moment of self-inspection and re-elaboration of thoughts.[68] In fact, autobiographies are the way in which humans make sense of their life[69], both for others and for themselves.[70] This can only happen in reflective moments, following a disruption of any kind.

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[63] Schechtman, "Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View," 162–63.

[64] Schechtman, 163.

[65] Schechtman, 163; Vice, "Literature and the Narrative Self," 96.

[66] Vice, "Literature and the Narrative Self," 96.

[67] Schechtman in Vice, 97.

[68] Vice, 97 and 107.

[69] Vice, 107.

[70] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 694.

Another relevant feature of the narrative self-construction is the idea that we create coherent narratives both to organise our life and our personalities, and to be able to communicate it to other people. Nevertheless, the account of a life creates a dilemma because it is a "privileged but troubled narrative in the sense that it is reflexive: the narrator and the central figure in the narrative are the same".[71] If the question is whether the narrator of the autobiography is reliable, we need to turn back to Bruner and assert that narrative is not univocal, that there is not one single way of interpreting reality. Autobiographies reflect the truth of the narrator, the one he created to organise his life. In fact, it is important to underline, as Bruner does, that the telling of a life is a cognitive achievement rather than something univocally given.[72]

Of course, autobiographies change, they adapt to the purpose and to the listener, not only to newly acquired memories. Bruner goes as far as hypothesising that the "forms of self-telling" might reveal a formal structure, and that it is the content that changes, but not the form.[73] He, in fact, forwards the idea that the famous *fabula*, *sjuzet* and *forma* theories by the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp seem to fit the self-narratives as well as any other narrative.[74] Following this idea, Bruner produced a parallelism between the characteristics of the self and the features of literary stories. This demonstrates that the self is also, but not only, a fictional narrative.[75]

In "Life as Narrative", Bruner quotes Sartre:

> "a man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him in terms of these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it"

The idea that we are characters in a story is already solid, therefore scholars tried to connect it to the stories of everyone else. As it is possible to point out thanks to Sartre's words, it is not just one individual that has a story and lives in a story, it is

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[71] Bruner, 693.

[72] Bruner, 692.

[73] Bruner, 696.

[74] Bruner, 696.

[75] Cometa, *Perchè le storie ci aiutano a vivere*, 126–28.

the whole community that does so. Therefore, the individual as a character is part of a society, and everyone in that society shares similar implicit self-narratives that contaminate the production of explicit-self narratives. This is a two-way concept: narratives produced by humans reflect the cultural context in which they are born, but it is also the cultural context that makes available some narrative models that people use to describe the course of their lives.[76] The basic idea is that we are drawn to think that our lives fit in certain genres pertaining to literature,[77] but the roles do not pertain to the realm of fiction, they pertain to culture. Vice suggests that

> The idea that we are somehow constrained in our lives by culturally available roles or character types can be linked to another idea that is common in this debate, the idea that our lives fit certain narrative types or genres.[78]

This reflects one of Bruner's ideas that he explored in "Life as Narrative". Life is not how it has been experienced but how it has been interpreted and re-interpreted. This demonstrates how a genre, a feature that is predominantly literary, can also be used to interpret a given account of a life.

The attribution of a genre to a self-narrative poses another question, namely, the risk of being inauthentic. The point of the narrative view is not to compare the life of a person to the life of a literary character, it is to understand in which measure life resembles literature, and how does this resemblance works. Therefore, to label a life narrative as belonging to a specific genre can be problematic, a matter of overdoing. Assigning a genre to a narrative of the self can lead to a derangement from a healthy idea of the self as a construction organised around memories and experiences, and lead to an over-construction of the self in literary terms.

All of these features of the narrative construction of the self come down to three basic questions that should resolve every doubt left.

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[76] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 694.

[77] Vice, "Literature and the Narrative Self," 100.

[78] Vice, 100.

> There are three basic questions for a narrative theorist: (1) What counts as a life-narrative? (2) What counts as having a narrative? and (3) What are the practical implications of having (or failing to have) a narrative?[79]

Schechtman proposes these questions in an attempt to object to some critics of the narrative view, but she eventually reaches another objective, that of clarifying that the theory underlying the construction is important, but it is likewise important to emphasise the actual implications of being creatures with a tendency for narrativization. She explains that there is a spectrum of three answers for each of the aforementioned questions.[80]

The first question could be answered with the representation of a weak life-narrative that envisions life as a simple sequence of events, a medium life-narrative that sees life as an account of interconnected events that also grants an explanatory relationship between them, and a strong life-narrative that is as close as possible to a story edited by a talented author, with a unifying theme and a direction.

There are as well three ways to describe what is a life narrative, the one at the weak end of the spectrum is that a person's narrative impacts the lived life unconsciously at any level, at the centre of the spectrum is the idea that one is able to access the life narrative only at times and to become aware of it in the moment of narration, while at the far end of the spectrum there is the idea that in order to have a life narrative one must always access and consciously live life in a narrative form.

To answer the third question there is as well a line of continuity that places the three possible answers in sequence, the first being a basic-benefit which envisions life as a necessary mean of a human being to function, the second being a medium-benefit in which the self-narrative becomes fundamental when engaging in certain complex activities, and a high-benefit that conceives the narrative as a self-conception that is paramount to live a full and happy life.[81]

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[79] Schechtman, "Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View," 159.

[80] Schechtman, 159–61.

[81] Schechtman, 160.

Schechtman points out that a singular narrative claim could be composed of a combination of answers to the three questions that fall in different positions for each question-related spectrum. However, she assesses that the most natural combination of answers falls at the centre of each spectrum. Hence, a person that has a healthy and balanced conception of the narrative view is conscious that

> someone needs a certain understanding of how the events in her history hang together, an understanding that is mostly implicit but that she can access locally where appropriate, if she is to be able to engage in person-specific activities on which we place great importance.[82]

In his studies Bruner already ruled out the idea that there is not a single way to construct reality by distinguishing the logical-scientifical thinking from the narrative thinking. However, some scholars objected to the narrative view, frequently stating that there might be a problem with the idea of narrative thinking itself. In fact, they sustain that human minds do not function in a univocal way, meaning that not everyone constructs their lives in the form of narrative.

One opponent to the narrative thinking theory is Galen Strawson, who claims that there is a distinction between Diachronic and Episodic self-experiences. On one hand, the Diachronic self envisions life in a line of continuity and organises memories and episodes of life accordingly. There is therefore a need for a narrative, which positions the present self between the past selves and the future self. On the other hand, the Episodical self is supposedly not concerned by past or future versions of the reality of the self, and therefore does not need narrative versions to make sense of life and memories.[83] The main focus of Strawson's argument is that he considers himself an Episodical person and that he has "no significant sense that the *I* […] was there in the further past"[84]. He also adds:

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[82] Schechtman, 161.

[83] Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* XVII (2004): 430.

[84] Strawson, 433.

> it seems clear to me, when I am experiencing or apprehending myself as a self, that the remoter past or future in question is not my past or future, although it is certainly the past or future of GS the human being.[85]

However, the fact that Strawson says that Episodics do not have a sense of the self in a line of continuity does not rule out the possibility that they narrativize their experiences and their selves as Diachronics do. Schechtman, among others, objects to Strawson's distinction between the Diachronic and the Episodic self[86] without tearing down his thesis. In fact, Schechtman objects that the Episodic self-experience simply represents a way of seeing the past-self as detached from the present-self, as if the actions and the personality of his past-self were not relevant to his present self. In explaining his position, Strawson brings forward the example of Henry James commenting that one of his early books feels foreign to him.[87] However, this does not mean that James was Episodical as Strawson claims him to be, it just means that the author re-thought his memories about his book and about his past-self. That past-self appears to be felt by James as a different person, a person that he was when the book was written, which is very different from his present-self. According to Schechtman, there is no evidence of any breach in the stream of consciousness, envisaged as uninterrupted sense of self, of neither Henry James, nor Strawson, nor any self-declared Episodic self, but rather there appears to be alienations from the past-selves.[88] Hence, to feel alienated from the past-self actually demonstrates that a sense of consciousness is present, and that is diametrically opposed to what Strawson claimed[89] – there still is a sense of consciousness even if the past-past self is perceived as foreign, therefore there is also a narrative. In fact, the author doesn't seem to realise that what

[85] Strawson, 433.

[86] Schechtman, "Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View."

[87] Strawson, "Against Narrativity," 429.

[88] Schechtman, "Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View," 175.

[89] Strawson, "Against Narrativity," 430.

he is offering as an account of a life that is absolutely not narrative, is actually quite a good narrative about it.[90]

Another objection to Strawson's idea that there might exist some humans that "are likely to have no particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms" can be condensed in a very simple question: how did we came to think of life and self in narrative terms if we didn't already envision our lives through narrative?

Once we realise that the account of our lives cannot but be a version of what we really lived, we come to understand that even our personalities need a narrative to be understood and rendered usable in everyday life. This is what is observable in the narration of Kat's life in "Hairball", and the main focus of the next part of this chapter.

2.2 Kat's narrative of the self

Although Kat's story is not a first-person narration, the story is dominated by her presence as a reflector character. The reader is presented with an indirect internal monologue, often through the employment of free indirect speech, which allows an analysis of Kat's narrative of the self even if the account of her story is mediated by a narrator. The presence of a narrator could even be considered an advantage in this situation, in fact, it permits to have a full vision of Kat's thoughts before the moment of re-elaboration of memories, that cannot but be in clear contrast with the re-elaborated memories of the past. The narrator doesn't seem to intrude in the narration but allows the reader to fully explore Kat's mental mechanisms with their inner contradictions. Furthermore, this narrative situation allows the reader to attach a personal interpretation to the character's narrative of the self before the final open ending of the short story. It also proves useful to understand the degree of intentionality in Kat's actions, which would probably be concealed in a first-person narration. In fact, Kat is conscious of her intentionality, both in her job and in her life, but she probably wouldn't allow herself to see that intentionality in her everyday life. If this

[90] Cometa, *Perchè le storie ci aiutano a vivere*, 134.

were a first-person narrative situation she would manipulate her narrative so that the reader would see her as she wants to be seen, namely, a transgressive woman.

Kat's intentionality surfaces rather early in the short story. From the very beginning the reader gets to know both Kat's interior life, and the image of herself that she wants to sell to others. The engine that puts the story in motion is Kat's surgical operation to remove an ovarian cyst, but her intense will to shock surfaces in the exact moment in which she decides to bring home her tumor, Hairball, and uses it as a mantel decoration. She refuses to throw it away even if her lover finds it "disgusting".[91]

> Ger says Kat has a tendency to push things to extremes, to go over the edge, merely from a juvenile desire to shock, which is hardly a substitute for wit. One of these days, he says, she will go way too far. Too far for him is what he means.[92]

It is possible to recognize the willingness to be different, to be unique as she wished her tumour was. Among the perks of the third person narration there is the fact that it allows the reader to be with Kat in the present of the narration. In fact, these events are not internalized already, they are happening simultaneously as the narration proceed. Kat understands the implication of what Ger is saying, but she does not envision what will happen later in the story. Conversely, she has quite a substantial narrative about her past and her previous selves:

> During her childhood, she was a romanticized Katherine, dressed by her misty- eyed, fussy mother in dresses that looked like ruffled pillowcases. By high school, she'd shed the frills and emerged as a bouncy, round-faced Kathy, with gleaming freshly washed hair and enviable teeth, eager to please and no more interesting than a health-food ad. At university she was Kath, blunt and no-bullshit in her Take-Back-the-Night jeans and checked shirt and her bricklayer-style striped denim peaked hat. When she ran away to England, she sliced herself down to Kat. It was economical, street-feline, and pointed as a nail. It was also unusual. In England you had to do something to get their attention, especially if you weren't English. Safe in this incarnation, she Ramboed through the eighties.[93]

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[91] Atwood, "Hairball," 41.

[92] Atwood, 41.

[93] Atwood, 42–43.

The narration is back to the past tense, and the degree of authorship in this discourse about her past suggests that there has been a re-elaboration. Kat's narrative about her past follows all the rules about the narrative of the self that were discussed in the previous section of this chapter. Her mind produces a narrative about her past that is useful for her to create an ordered sequence of events, a lens through which she looks at the time slices of herself and interprets her past accordingly. Each time slice is evident and is labelled by Kat herself. With this narrative she is able to idealise the changes that she underwent throughout the years, but also to keep her life under control. However, the protagonist of the short story seems to create a narrative in which she repudiates her past versions of the self: Katherine gives space to Kathy, which in turns becomes Kath and eventually turns into Kat. This might be a representation of what Strawson means when assessing the existence of an Episodical sense of the self. However, as previously discussed, Kat's sense of her past selves only demonstrates an alienation from them, not the inexistence of a sense of life as an ordered narrative.

What is notable is that the progressive slicing down of her name reflects some considerable changes in the descriptions she gives of her past selves. From the romanticised version of herself, she grows up to be an adolescent "eager to please", but she seems to consider herself non-desirable. Therefore, the next version of herself that the reader gets to know is Kath, a university student with a strong attitude and a specific style, eager to get attention. When she runs away from Canada, she intentionally "slice[s] herself down"[94], masterfully cutting away the parts of herself that she does not want anymore. In the light of this revelation the whole account of her past acquires another meaning and reinforces the idea that she is authoring her personality, creating an ordered narrative that makes sense both in terms of "reality constraints" and in terms of "articulation constraints". There is more intentionality in the idea that she had to get the attention of the English, as if she had to stand out even more that she did in Canada, creating a contrast between the two nations. She feels safe in the character that she constructed for herself, so much so that she *ramboes*

[94] Atwood, 43.

through the eighties— violently, aggressively.[95] These versions of herself are "time-slices" of her personality that have to be considered "through time" and "in time".

Kat's intentionality is not only limited to her words, but her actions betray intentionality as well. She perfects her own movements as to appear strong, authoritative. She also ponders her choices, her actions, everything she does is perfectly measured, calculated as to create a specific image of herself in the eyes of others. She perfects her stare, her turn of the neck, she also asks herself where a person like the one she is trying so hard to be would have lunch.

Kat feels so confident in her own skin that she is convinced that it is her name that led her to her current job in an avant-garde magazine. "She climbed the ladder and got to the top of the creative chain, she became a creator of total looks."[96] Her position as an author of narratives thus expands, it is not confined to her inner self, but she transforms it into a job and in a way of life. So much so that she doesn't only work on the pages of the magazine, she also works on her boss, Gerald.

> He'd been Gerald when they first met. It was she who transformed him, first to Gerry, then to Ger. (Rhymed with "flair," rhymed with "dare.") She made him get rid of those sucky pursed-mouth ties, told him what shoes to wear, got him to buy a loose-cut Italian suit, redid his hair. A lot of his current tastes-in food, in drink, in recreational drugs, in women's entertainment underwear-were once hers. In his new phase, with his new, hard, stripped-down name ending on the sharpened note of "r," he is her creation.
> As she is her own.[97]

Ger's slicing down becomes a mirror of Kat's own re-definition. As much as she eliminated the sides of her own persona that she did not want to include in her narrative, so she did with Gerald. Kat polishes him, grants him the confidence that she herself has acquired through her narrative changes. When Kat first met him "He was not funny, he was not knowledgeable, he had little verbal charm. But he was eager, he

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[95] According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, a Rambo is "someone who uses, or threatens to use, strong and violent methods against their enemies".

[96] Atwood, "Hairball," 43.

[97] Atwood, 42.

was tractable, he was blank paper"[98]. The word choice is intentional, Kat considers Ger "blank paper", suggesting a page that she is allowed to write on, as she does in her job, thus connecting her pronounced tendency to create total looks not only for the magazine, but also for herself and Gerald as well. Therefore, she envisions his change as she envisions her own self-change, she frees his potential, authors Gerald into Ger, creates a new narrative for him, and he lets her do so. However, there are repercussions, and Kat did not saw them coming.

The repercussions that Kat has to face after creating a new Gerald are in the domain of the projective identification. The theory of projective identification explores the mechanism through which a person absorbs the strength of another person before dismissing the other because it comes to represent a menace for the new personality that has been established. [99] In this case, Ger is a blank paper onto which Kat writes a new narrative that includes her strength, her determination, her way of thinking and way of living. He allows her to do so and she rejoices in seeing her creation before the moment of disruption.

> He's beautifully done up, in a lick-my-neck silk shirt open at the throat, an eat-your-heart-out Italian silk-and-wool loose knit sweater. Oh, cool insouciance. Oh, eyebrow language. He's a money man who lusted after art, and now he's got some, now he is some. Body art. Her art. She's done her job well; he's finally sexy.[100]

Ger becomes her creation, her art, but it is a creation that turns its back to the creator. In fact, when Kat goes back to the office shortly after the operation, she is fired by Ger himself, who is supposed to take her place in the creative direction of the magazine. The projective identification process has come to its end, he dismisses her after taking her place. "Naturally. Betrayal. The monster has turned on its own mad scientist. 'I gave you life,' she wants to scream at him."[101]

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[98] Atwood, 48.

[99] Töttrup, "The Complexity of the Female Role: A Study of Margaret Atwood's Short Stories Wilderness Tips, Hairball, True Trash and The Bog Man," 8.

[100] Atwood, "Hairball," 52.

[101] Atwood, 52.

Many references to Shelley's *Frankenstein* can be found in the short story, and it is interesting to see that by comparing Ger to the Creature[102], Kat compares herself to the scientist that gave him life, and thus recalls the power battle that happens in *Frankenstein* between the creator and the Creature, forecasting Ger's betrayal.[103]

The usurpation happens in a realm that Kat deeply knows how to handle, namely her job. Her position is perfectly fitting for a person with a strong tendency to narrativize life — she is a creator of total looks. Through the pages of the magazine, she offers people "this thing, this thing that would give them eminence and power and sexual allure, would attract envy to them-but for a price. The price of the magazine."[104]

She seems to be aware of the fact that she sells distorted images, a reality that is not plausible. The images are all lights and cameras and right angles, a tailored narrative is the only thing that the magazine cannot sell. Kat seems to realise the emptiness of the suggestions she gives through the smooth pages of the magazine. She herself declares that she works with "the gap between reality and perception".[105] The interesting thing is that she does not seem to realise that this talent is the same that she uses to shape Ger's personality, and to shape her narrative of the self as well. In fact, none of the details about her job at the magazine as a Goddess of fictionality are given in the present tense. Journalism in the short story emerges clearly as a metaphor for scripting a life,[106] and in turn the magazine appears to be a metaphor for life itself. Kat has to negotiate her ideas with the board of direction in the same way in which she has to negotiate her life narrative according to the constraints of reality and articulation, and the rules of society. While creating a narrative that is both plausible and tellable appears to be easy, the negotiation between her personality and the cultural roles available in society seems to be tougher. The degree of intentionality embedded in each action and choice Kat makes in her life brings her closer to a strong life-narrative.

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[102] Atwood, 42.

[103] Marlene Goldman, "Margaret Atwood's 'Hairball': Apocalyptic Cannibal Fiction," in *Rewriting Apocalypce in Canadian Fiction* (Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 93.

[104] Atwood, "Hairball," 43–44.

[105] Atwood, 49.

[106] Davidson, "Negotiationg Wilderness Tips," 185.

Hence, if the moulding of the personality is too close to the creation of an artefact, she runs the risk of being inauthentic.[107]

Kat attempts to turn her life into art, but in doing so she does not realise that this is what she did both in her job and with Gerald. An inauthentic inner narrative could lead to post-hoc modifications in bad faith, to the suppression of things that really happened in favour of a narrative that might not be authentic.[108] In this case, the overly manufactured life narrative of the protagonist appears to suppress segments of reality. It will be possible to see that the betrayal will not come from the outside, but from the inside. A moment of disruption in an overly authored narrative of the self is emotionally more damaging than Ger's betrayal, but the two would contribute equally to the creation of a more balanced inner life.

The moment of disruption comes with the betrayal, but that moment only highlights something that was already there, something that has been lingering in the dark and waited for the right moment to come out.

> She sees now what she's wanted, what she's been missing. Gerald is what she's been missing: the stable, unfashionable, previous, tight-assed Gerald. Not Ger, not the one she's made in her own image. The other one, before he got ruined. The Gerald with a house and a small child and a picture of his wife in a silver frame on his desk.[109]

The narration is back in the present tense, Kat has an epiphany while standing in front of Ger and realises that what she has been missing is Gerald. Although she has been insecure about her relationship with Ger for a while, there seems to be something that still tied her to him, to their adulterous relationship.[110] The slicing down of her name mirrors that of Gerald's name, which in turns echoes the building up of his new personality, a personality that is now comparable to hers, both in terms of transgressiveness and of intentionality. By way of antonyms, she does not want the unstable, fashionable, current, relaxed Ger. In fact, by being transformed into

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[107] Vice, "Literature and the Narrative Self," 102–3.

[108] Vice, 103.

[109] Atwood, "Hairball," 52.

[110] Atwood, 50–51.

something that resembles the person she tries very hard to be, "he got ruined". By extension, this realisation hurts her deeply because it is not limited to Ger, it involves her in the first person — she might have got ruined as well. "There are other jobs. There are other men, or that's the theory. Still, something's been ripped out of her."[111] The most obvious interpretation is that what has been ripped out of her is Hairball, the tumorous ball of tissue that a doctor took out of her body.

There are several distinct ways of interpreting Hairball in the short story that will be investigated throughout this thesis. Among these interpretations, one concerns more closely the narrative view that is being discussed in this chapter: Hairball metaphorically envisioned as a physical proof of Kat's transgressiveness that surfaces in her life as a message for her, originating in her own body. Hairball is her raging and transgressive side that takes the shape of a physical tangible object that, at first, she does not want to abandon and keeps in her house. It is a ball of tissue, with perfectly formed teeth and, interestingly enough, even brain tissue. However, all these fragments lack structure, foundations.

Hairball's lack of structure resonates against the overly structured narrative of Kat's life. After Ger's betrayal and Kat realisation that the façade that she constructed for him is neither what she wanted for him nor herself, the fallacious narrative of the transgressive woman is easily torn down. Kat starts crying, something that she doesn't do, "not normally, not lately".[112] The sequence of words revises her narrative about the act of crying, and in a single sentence her complete negation of the act of crying becomes a more truthful declaration. Probably, in the narrative that she sold to herself, she wasn't the kind of person that was allowed to cry, but the fact that she revises that position, alludes to a complete disintegration of that narrative. The same process happens to the narrative about her raging side of the self. In fact, she does not know what to answer to Dania when she is asked about the reason why she is full of hate.[113] Her narrative about that is wavering as well: now that Hairball is not part of her body that side of her personality lacks structure like the cyst itself, it lacks foundations.

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[111] Atwood, 53.

[112] Atwood, 55.

[113] Atwood, 55.

According to Atwood, “women-in-the-wilderness books frequently contain a mirror scene – a scene in which the woman looks in the mirror and sees that she has been altered”[114] and in “Hairball” this moment is present even if the “wilderness” is not intended as untouched, wild nature.

> She stares into the bathroom mirror, assesses her face in the misted glass. A face of the eighties, a mask face, a bottom-line face; push the weak to the wall and grab what you can. But now it’s the nineties. Is she out of style, so soon? She’s only thirty-five, and she’s already losing track of what people ten years younger are thinking. That could be fatal. As times goes by, she’ll have to race faster and faster to keep up, and for what?[115]

In her reflective hour, her “moment of recognition”, Kat, finally on the verge of revising her life narrative, sees herself through the mist. The metaphor is very straightforward, it is as if Kat never saw herself clearly before that moment. She identifies her face as a “mask face” created after years of building up a personality. However, her personality does not seem to be in step with the times, thus consequently it may be read as in step with her newly acquired knowledge of the self. “A running sore, a sore from running so hard.”[116] In the moment in which she stops running after trends, but also running after an image of herself that necessarily has to be in fashion, she stops and feels sore. The running sore might point to a crucial change of step in her life, signals her finding herself on the very brink of change. This is the moment in which the protagonist considers if she should continue to run after an ideal life, if it is worth it, or if she needs to revise her life narrative. Once again, the narrator voices Kat’s personal thoughts public for the reader. “Part of the life she should have had is just a gap, it isn’t there, it’s nothing. What can be salvaged from it, what can be redone, what can be done at all?”[117] Kat is deciding what she should do. Nevertheless, she already knows that there is something missing in her life, thus we might guess her

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[114] Margaret Atwood, “Linoleum Caves,” in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 107.

[115] Atwood, “Hairball,” 54.

[116] Atwood, 54.

[117] Atwood, 54.

decision to start anew. The present tense and the poignant tone of the scene emphasise the difficulty of the decision, involving the emotional commitment of the reader as well.

As mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, the narrative of the self is the way in which humans make sense of their lives, and in this specific case, Kat's ordered tenets of her life crumbled after a moment of disruption. Therefore, a need for a new narrative emerges, to make sense of what Kat just learned about herself and the world that she lives in. This is the moment in which Atwood reverses the traditional cautionary tale plot and transforms this short story in something different, in a story that empowers women and does not represent them surrendering to societal imperatives and stereotypes about women's roles. In fact, Kat decides to have her revenge. She has been invited by Cheryl, Ger's wife, to a party at their house to celebrate his promotion to the creative department, a position that he stole from her. She decides not to go, but she sends a package with Hairball, all drained and dressed up in pink tissue paper. The note that goes with it says: "Gerald, Sorry I couldn't be with you. This is all the rage. Love, K."[118]

Ger is back to being Gerald, she calls him with his full name, in a kind of mockery. It's insulting.[119] However, it is also possible to interpret her words as a desperate attempt to ask for forgiveness to the man she transformed, a man that she just realised she wanted to be with. Furthermore, Kat gives Hairball to him, she gives it up as "all the rage". Her tumorous cyst that has been brought to light is the container of all of her rage, which she sends to her former lover that betrayed her in an outrageous act of misbehaviour. She does not even sign herself as Kat but shortens her name one last time to "K.". As mentioned before, every name change that she imposed on herself coincides with a different personality. This personality is revengeful, is strong, but it is also remorseful for the man that she transformed in a copycat creature of herself, a version of herself that she is ready to abandon and move on from. The revenge is only symbolic, but she is preparing herself for a fresh beginning.[120]

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[118] Atwood, 56.

[119] Atwood, 42.

[120] Nischik, "Margaret Atwood's Short Fiction and Shorter Stories," 151.

The traditional binary opposition between the Self and the Other can help shed some light on the interpretation of Hairball as a message from her body. The thing that fascinates Kat about Hairball is that her body produced it, before being surgically removed. Therefore, her Self becomes the other, her inside takes the shape of an uncanny external object. Kat sees Hairball as a personification of her transgressiveness, she now recognises that it is ugly, uncanny, and similarly to what she did with Gerald, she projects on Hairball all her rage and decides to send it to her lover.

> It's her gift, valuable and dangerous. It's her messenger, but the message it will deliver is its own. It will tell the truth to whoever asks. It's right that Gerald should have it; after all, it's his child, too.[121]

Hairball spoke to her, it told her unexpected truths about herself and her world. For that, she loves Hairball. It told her that she has ruined her lover, who is also someone she might actually want. She realises that the version of the selves that she created for herself and for Gerald are empty, dangerous, as the tips that she dispenses through the magazine. Hairball told her "everything she's never wanted to hear about herself".[122] Now, it will tell its truth to Ger, whatever that might be.

Gerald is to be considered Hairball's father in the sense that it is the source and the recipient of Kat's rage. In fact, Hairball can be considered a wretched entity that Kat at some point had to expel as it came to represent something undesirable,[123] her rage. In fact, once Hairball is on her way to Ger's house, she feels liberated. "She has done an outrageous thing, but she doesn't feel guilty. She feels light and peaceful and filled with charity, and temporarily without a name."[124]

Kat doesn't have regrets for that last extreme action she performed, on the contrary, she feels light and filled with charity. It is common for people to feel

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[121] Atwood, "Hairball," 56.

[122] Atwood, 55.

[123] Fisher, "Between Oneself and the Other: Empathy, Dialogism, and Feminist Narratology in Two Novels by Margaret Atwood," 21.

[124] Atwood, "Hairball," 57.

charitable after a benevolent act, thus it is interesting to consider that Kat might be proud of her gift because it won't just get her some revenge over Ger's betrayal, but she hopes Hairball will tell him the truth as well, unearth some secrets.

If we consider Kat as the exemplification of the theories of the narrative of the self in the light of her various name-changes that go together with alterations in her personality, the open ending of the short story which depicts Kat's as "nameless" renders it is even more challenging to interpret. The final namelessness might represent Kat's newly acquired vulnerability that is emerging after she gave up the wild part of herself. However, it also signifies that she is not reverting back to one of her previous versions of the self, but she is not even staying "K.", the latest of her selves. The short story opens in the past tense of the narration but closes in the present, symbolising once again that the contemporaneity of the narration is not processed, it hasn't been re-elaborated yet. In fact, the ending might portray exactly the moment preceding the re-thinking of memories in order to create a narrative of the self, the time that Vice calls "the reflective hours" in which humans create their versions of reality about themselves and their past.

In the final lines of the short story a psychological need for a new beginning, that is discreetly suggested since the very first lines, emerges clearly. Similarly to what happens in "Wilderness Tips", the ending of the short story seems to suggest an imminent death of the protagonist. In "Wilderness Tips" the reader might be led to believe that Portia will let herself die in the lake, and in "Hairball" an insistence on the idea that Kat hasn't completely recovered from the operation might lead to the same supposition. However, there are two references to death in the incipit of "Hairball", one of them refers to the possible malignancy of the cyst. On the contrary, Hairball proves to the benign, it might thus predict positive events, which to some extent turns out to be true. Furthermore, the story opens from a place of death and closes from a place of re-birth symbolised by the protagonist's namelessness, which is proper of new-borns only. Because of that it is possible to interpret the final namelessness as a moment of re-birth, excluding therefore the possibility of Kat's death.

3. What is a woman?

To begin to talk about women and how womanhood is perceived both in society and in literature, the first question that it is necessary to answer is quite simple – what is a woman? Undeniably, this is not the first instance in which this question has been posed, and among others, Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* brilliantly worked to answer that question. Without diving deep in the waters of feminist theory, which has developed throughout the years and is always still in the making, it is nonetheless important to taste the waters of the feminist discourse by trying to answer that question concisely so as to lay the basis of the discussion that will follow in the next part of this chapter. What follows is undoubtedly a simplistic reading of a topic that cannot be reduced to a few lines, but it is hopefully enough to frame the analysis of the character of Kat in "Hairball".

A woman is what is not man. This simple sentence brings with it endless meanings, but what concerns us in the light of this analysis is the idea that what is female is defined in relation to what is male. "Man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself"[125], writes De Beauvoir. The oppositional model of subjectivity suggests that the self is defined by way of antinomy, thus what we are not consequently defines what we are.[126] This definition by way of exclusion that characterises what is female as everything that is not male, created a male-female binary opposition onto which the patriarchal system laid its basis, but it also brought to an historical socio-political discrimination of the female gender. It could be also argued that patriarchy itself is the driving force behind this definition, and that discriminations and stereotypes attached to the female gender predate the definition itself. This idea creates a circle in which the origin of the discrimination is lost, but its power is maintained. The discriminatory division of the supposed characteristics typical of the two sexes gave birth to a series of stereotypes that crawled their way into Western society's main

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[125] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 2010 ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1949), 26.

[126] Fisher, "Between Oneself and the Other: Empathy, Dialogism, and Feminist Narratology in Two Novels by Margaret Atwood," 47.

mode of thinking, and the features connected with the idea of womanhood became the dominant way of describing the gender.

> it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One. But in order for the Other not to turn into the One, the Other has to submit to this foreign point of view.[127]

The definition of the Other rises from the definition of the One, that is to say of the self that is in the process of defining. In this context, man demarcated what they thought they were and how they were allowed to behave, without resorting to any empirical given but creating by way of distinction the ideas of male and female legit behaviours. The female gender was thus conceived as the Other, denoting from the beginning its position of inferiority as compared to the dominant position of the male gender.

Furthermore, religion certainly had a fair share of influence on this discourse, especially for whatever concerns the dominant mode of thinking of the western culture, that is closely connected with Christianity and the precepts of the Bible.[128] It is from religion that we, as society, inherited some of the binary oppositions that play a central role in our culture. Among them there is the opposition between male and female, in which the former was created first, and the latter, therefore assessing implicitly which gender is dominant.

For what concerns the inferior gender, the female, another binary opposition was created as to divide the subjects belonging to that category into good or bad. It was probably by comparing the Madonna in the Bible with any other woman that the distinction between good and bad women arose, whereas the mother of God in Western religions is represented as opposed to any other women.[129] The Madonna represented for centuries the role model to which women were to aspire to. However, the goal of

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[127] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 27.

[128] Jonathan Gottschall et al., "Can Literary Study Be Scientific?: Results of an Empirical Search for the Virgin/Whore Dichotomy," *Nterdisciplinary Literary Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 2.

[129] Marlene Goldman, "Introduction: The Apocalyptic Paradigm," in *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction* (Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 12.

reaching such perfection proved both unattainable for women, and convenient for men to keep their privileged status of superiority, granting them the possibility to be imperfect while pushing women to reach for a greater morality. Women are in fact "expected to be morally better than men"[130] and those who do not engage in a quest for a greater morality run the risk of sinking even further in the category of the "bad woman", and are at times described as witches, Medusas, or scary monsters.[131]

This distinction implies that there is clear relegation of the ideal of the good woman to a specific role, the infamous "chaste, silent and obedient" prototype, that stands in sharp contrast with the stereotype of the scolding, sexualised, unruly woman. This dichotomy, namely, the Virgin/Madonna-Whore dichotomy, keeps the female gender in check under the dominance of the male part. The dichotomy that contrasts the figure of the Virgin/Madonna, associated with positive traits such as tenderness, reliability, faithfulness, controllability, and the figure of the Whore, the unreliable and promiscuous, scolding and uncontrollable woman, is retraceable in most cultures, and foregrounds the establishment of the stereotype that encloses women in either one or the other category. This dichotomy became so strongly rooted in the ideals of patriarchy that the mainstream culture taught women that the Madonna is the role model they should strive for, thus consequently demonising the figure of the Whore.

Throughout history, the prototype of the ideal woman developed and modified, and so did the fundamental male need to retain some power over women. For centuries women were relegated to the role of the tameable wife, who nurtures the children and is able to please the husband. Nowadays, thanks to the feminist revolution women are not ostracised for not being chaste, silent and obedient, and the number of possible paths that women could take greatly broadened. Societal restrictions changed, and women have fewer limitations in their behaviours, even if the spectre of the categorisation into "good" or "bad" women still retains some power, though in a different way.

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[130] Brooks J. Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood* (The University of Massachusets Press, 1993), 2.

[131] Bouson, 2.

The ideas connected with the possibilities of breaking societal rules, of being transgressive, changed over the course of history, especially after the feminist revolutions, whose second wave coincided with the early literary production of Margaret Atwood. And yet, even if it is possible to say that the behaviours that were considered transgressive since the 70s were very different from the behaviours that were considered transgressive in the Elizabethan era, the common denominator between the two ideas of transgressiveness is the same – the crossing of boundaries. In fact, someone/something transgressive is considered what breaks societal rules. Those rules are everchanging, but they always retain the same power. The breaking of the rules brings, as always, the risk of being ostracised, marginalised.

However, the idea that women may threaten the status quo of the patriarchal society is not the only reason buttressing women's discrimination. Another thing that juxtaposes women of all times and discriminatory discourses is the representation of women's bodies over the centuries.

Female bodies, because of their changeable nature, have been often described as monstrous, frightening, grotesque. The concept of the grotesque body by Mikhail Bakhtin is among the most influential on the theme of "grotesque realism", which "reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming".[132] The female body is the one that undergoes a copious number of changes throughout time, especially compared to the male body. Interpreters of Bakhtin observed that the body which he talks about, "a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body"[133], is in fact a fitting description of the body of a woman that through pregnancy and childbirth undergoes a process of biological change. These ideas connect the female body to grotesque and aberrant images, consequently creating the perception that an incontrollable body must coincide with an uncontrollable mind that misbehaves, rendering the female promiscuous, both verbally and physically. From here the ideological discrimination of the female gender

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[132] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Introduction," in *Rabelais and His World*, ed. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 24.

[133] Bakhtin, "The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources," 317.

rises, intensifying the connection between an unruly body and an unruly mind that justifies punishment and the relegation of women to silence.[134]

Therefore, the ideal woman was associated with bodily stasis, with a body that could be sexualized only within the boundaries of marriage, controlled even when changing, fruitful but not aberrant, and home to a stable mind that is not influenced by promiscuity. By way of opposition, the flawed woman has a sexualized grotesque body that is frightening because is not controllable and is home to a deranged mind. This opposition reinforces and gives stability to the already mentioned Virgin/Madonna-Whore dichotomy.

Although the Madonna-Whore dichotomy remains a current motive in nowadays society, and is studied under various perspectives, ranging from the obvious feminist take, to psychology, it adapted to the new landscape of society. A new category of women has been added to the list, and that is the Strong woman. She encompasses all of the most positive features of both the good and the bad woman. The fact that this new category emerged recently does not mean that women that correspond to this description never existed before, it only means that thanks to the discourses on feminism and the evolution of society this category is now recognised and thus normalised. The qualities of the strong women

> include the openness, vulnerability, and playfulness of the virgin; the niceness, tenderness, empathy of the madonna or mother; the sexuality of the whore. By combining these, and adding formerly male types of intelligence, courage, directness, and honesty, she suggests wholeness – with both its lures and dangers she thus becomes an object of both attraction and fear, to men, other women, and herself.[135]

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[134] Shapira, "Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque," 52–53.

[135] Deborah Tanzer, "Real Men Don't Eat Strong Women: The Virgin-Madonna-Whore Complex Updated," *The Journal of Psychohistory* 12, no. 4 (1985): 490, http://proxy.lib.sfu.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=1986-19777-001&site=ehost-live.

These words suggest that this new "category" of women that was born after years of feminist theories and fights for the equality of the sexes, is still a woman that threatens society because it not only blurs the boundaries between the good and the bad woman that are still embedded in the social fabric, while blurring gender boundaries, thus posing the ultimate threat to the patriarchal society.[136]

3.1 Atwood's feminism

There is no need to venture in a long and complicated feminist discourse to realise that the western society is still characterized by a strong patriarchal attitude. Whether it is through the writings of feminist exponents or through the common debate that sees gender inequalities at the centre of the public arena, the role of the woman in society is still a debated issue in contemporaneity, as well as in the works of Margaret Atwood.

Atwood dares to challenge the definition of feminism, frequently asking what that word means to her interlocutors. In fact, the author reckons that the boundaries of the concept of "feminism" are now blurred since this word has gained plenty of different meanings in time and it does not have a univocal reading anymore.

> I usually say, 'Tell me what you mean by that word and then we can talk.' If people can't tell me what they mean, then they don't really have an idea in their heads of what they're talking about. So do we mean equal legal rights? Do we mean women are better than men? Do we mean all men should be pushed off a cliff? What do we mean? Because that word has meant all of those different things.[137]

Atwood demonstrated to have a complicated relationship with the idea of feminism although coincidentally the publication of the novel that consecrated her as a prose writer, *The Edible Woman* in 1969, coincided with the emergence of a new

[136] Tanzer, 490–91.

[137] EW Staff, "Emma Watson Interviews Margaret Atwood about The Handmaid's Tale," 14 July, 2017.

wave of feminism in North America.[138] Nevertheless, the author rejected the idea that the novel was part of that second wave of feminism but claimed that it preceded it.

> There was no women's movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965, and I'm not gifted with clairvoyance, though like many at the time I'd read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors.[139]

Atwood's witty writing led the public opinion of the time to label her as a feminist writer, but she herself claims that if the novel was anything of a feminist kind, it could only have been proto feminist.[140] This demonstrates that although Atwood can be connected to the feminist movement for both her works and her figure, she insists that labelling her a feminist writer does not fully describe her essence. "I would not deny the adjective, but I don't consider it inclusive. There are many other interests of mine that I wouldn't want the adjective to exclude"[141], she stated.

Though she does not reject feminism in itself, she does refuse the label to be attached to her work. Atwood is aligned with the ideas of Julia Kristeva, who claims that political interpretations that claim group identities, such as feminism that often spoke about "we" as "all women", can lead to dogmatisation and annihilation of personal differences.[142] In this context, it might also be possible to borrow Judy Butler's ideas in the framework of gender theory and apply them to the discourse of feminism and labelling. Butler suggests how coming out of the closet as homosexual might only "produce a new and different 'closet'".[143] That is to say that every label brings with it a specific set of behaviours and societal expectations that might not be comprehensive of the whole "I" that accepts a label. By extension, Atwood's refusal

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[138] Staines, "Margaret Atwood in Her Canadian Context," 17.

[139] Staines, 17.

[140] Staines, 17.

[141] Fisher, "Between Oneself and the Other: Empathy, Dialogism, and Feminist Narratology in Two Novels by Margaret Atwood," 6.

[142] Kelly Oliver, "Julia Kristeva's Feminist Revolutions," *Hypatia* 8, no. 3 (1993): 98, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810407.

[143] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (Routledge, 1993), 309.

of the "feminist" label reflects the rejection of the totalisation of her "I" under the flag of feminism that, although differently from patriarchy, brings with it norms and clear cut boundaries. Therefore, it is possible to say that although Atwood writes about feminist topics, she does not want the idea of feminism to bind her art. Instead, she foregrounds almost the opposite idea, encouraging the readers to discern in her writings the leitmotifs driving the public discourse, without considering them as manifestos of specific stances in debates, but as reflections of society itself. Atwood in fact describes herself as an observer of society, who proposes certain interpretations about the world, and some of them happen to be feminist.[144]

However, thanks to feminism, in the early 70s society was changing, and thus literature as well, opening new possibilities to understand women's behaviours. The Women's Movement not only expanded the horizons of the public debate, but it also allowed some topics to seep into literature as well. Atwood in one of her lectures observed how the expansion of the topics that were made available to the public use were something that literature did not delay the use of, though initially exaggerating the goodness in women and accentuating the badness of man.[145] This strong feminist perspective is fathered by the theories of Hélène Cixous, who in *L'écriture feminine* suggested that literature that portrayed women should have been written by women only, since for years that possibility was ruled out by the imposing presence of the male part that prevented women from writing about themselves.[146]

This engendered even more the polarization between man and women, creating a distance that literature could not fully satisfy, and thus leaving feminist writers with

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[144] Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, 3.

[145] Atwood, "Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature."

[146] Madeleine Davies, "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 59; Fisher, "Between Oneself and the Other: Empathy, Dialogism, and Feminist Narratology in Two Novels by Margaret Atwood," 4–5.

the limited choices of creating spotless heroines that held high the banner of moral irreproachability and liberation from male oppression.[147]

As it is possible to imagine, Atwood finds herself against this utopian representation of women in literature, foregrounding in fact in the opposite idea. By imposing rules on the creation of positive descriptions of women made by women only, it is likely that one might run the risk of imposing power politics in the name of feminism. In doing so, one might be replicating the patriarchal power politics moves used to oppress women.

On a positive note, Atwood adds:

> Of course, the feminist analysis made some kinds of behaviour available to female characters which, under the old dispensation – the pre-feminist one – would have been considered bad, but under the new one were praiseworthy. A female character could rebel against social strictures without then having to throw herself in front of a train like Anna Karenina; she could think the unthinkable and say the unsayable; she could flout authority. She could do new bad-good things, such as leaving her husband and even deserting her children. Such activities and emotions, however, were – according to the new moral thermometer of the times – not really bad at all; they were good, and the women who did them were praiseworthy. I'm not against such plots. I just don't think they are the only ones.[148]

Therefore, even if the emancipation of such topics might imply the liberation of all of them, that was not the case. Certain matters remained outside the range of permission, otherwise the female author would run the risk of being criticised for not being feminist enough, or even anti-feminist. The author comments that she doesn't think that the kinds of plots in which the female character only does "new bad-good things" were "the only ones" available for writers to pick up and use, especially if all the interesting parts were left to the male characters, who were now not only authorised, but encouraged to be bad. In short, Atwood objected to the creation of

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[147] Atwood, "Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature."

[148] Atwood.

unrealistic characters in literature, in which women were flattened into a fake pretentious general goodness, and man exaggerated in their wickedness.

In "Spotty Handed Villainesses", a 1994 conference now inserted in the collection *Curious Pursuits,* Atwood supported the creation of evil female characters.

> Evil women are necessary in story traditions for two much more obvious reasons, of course. First, they exist in life, so why shouldn't they exist in literature? Second – which may be another way of saying the same thing – women have more to them than virtue. They are fully dimensional human beings; they too have subterranean depths; why shouldn't their many-dimensionality be given literary expression? And when it is, female readers do not automatically recoil in horror.[149]

Feminism appeared to be prescriptive in the creation in female characters that were irreproachable in their actions and thoughts according to the moral thermometer of the time, that broadened possibilities for women outside patriarchal impositions and stereotypes. That is because strongly feminist writers tried to use literature to collapse the representations of women influenced by patriarchal precepts and discriminations by resorting to the creation of female characters that were allowed to do the "new bad-good things, such as leaving [their] husband[s] and even deserting [their] children".[150] However, they did not contemplate what Atwood calls "the new no-no's"[151].

> there were certain new no-no's. For instance: was it at all permissible, any more, to talk about women's will to power, because weren't women supposed by nature to be communal egalitarians? Could one depict the scurvy behaviour often practised by women against one another, or by little girls against other little girls? Could one examine the Seven Deadly Sins in their female versions – to remind you, Pride, Anger, Lust, Envy, Avarice, Greed and Sloth – without being considered anti-feminist? Or was a mere mention of such things tantamount to aiding and abetting the enemy, namely the male power-structure? Were we

[149] Atwood.

[150] Atwood.

[151] Atwood.

> to have a warning hand clapped over our mouths, yet once again, to prevent us from saying the unsayable – though the unsayable had changed?[152]

With the exclusion of such topics, it is not difficult to see that while women were able to behave more freely than ever thanks to the action of feminist movements, new limitations arose from the very heart of feminism. Women in literature could never be represented fighting among each other or working their way to power, especially at the expenses of other fellow women, they could only be a united front fighting the enemy, that is men and patriarchy. The newly opened possibilities for women writers to create characters that represented women under a feminist perspective brought with it harsh critiques to the literary products that did not conform with the newly established feminist canon. That canon took distance from the patriarchy-influenced one by creating unrealistic representations of women were misrepresented in literature in spite of their being allowed to behave more freely. Atwood herself was criticised for portraying female characters who were not considered morally irreproachable by the harsh feminist trend.

> In the age of high feminism, which took place in 1978 or 9, I used to get attacked for having female characters that were not perfect in every respect, that behaved badly and had emotions such as jealousy, anger, malevolence, and the whole box of tricks. […] it's just that people for a while, in that swing reaction that takes place, wanted to have all women as victims, hard done by, virtuous, pure and nice, kind and gentle, and if they did have bad personality traits it was the fault of the patriarchy, but I think that view has kind of dissipated by now, and anyway it was a view that deprived women of responsibility for their own actions and behaviour.[153]

Atwood believed that authors should remain free of the constrictions that labels bring with them, and in this case, they should be free to create morally imperfect

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[152] Atwood.

[153] Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, ""On Being a Woman Writer": Atwood's Canadian and Feminist Contexts," in *Critical Insights: Margaret Atwood*, ed. Brooks J. Bouson (Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2013), 41.

female characters,[154] that do not partake in the restrictive feminist representation trend that dominated the literary scene of the time. This brought to the construction of characters that were unrealistic both in the representation of women, but also on the representations of men,[155] that according to Atwood got "all the juicy parts"[156].

Atwood's preoccupation with the representation of women in literature can be considered as a reflection of her ideas about women's roles in society. The majority of her literary production revolves around that topic, both in poems and prose and non-fiction. Throughout the years, Atwood managed to tackle this discourse from different perspectives, creating noteworthy readings of the female body.

The author frequently wrote about the representation of the female body; the most concrete example of her ideas about it can be found in "The Female Body", a short prose poem dated 1990, that was later inserted in the collection *Good Bones*, published in 1993. The poem depicts various standpoints on the representations of the female body and describes the female body as a "hot topic",[157] of which there exist many kinds, one for each woman existing. However, they are all are associated with the same stereotypes, showing multiple ways in which female bodies are seen in contemporary culture. It is very clearly a critique to a distorted representation of female bodies that takes the issue to the extreme, presents the female body as a mannequin that need to be accessorised, and pinpoints societal expectations on women, their supposed duties and their uses. Although it opens with a female narrator describing her "topical topic"[158] from her point of view, the perspective suddenly changes and the narration takes on a strong male perspective that dehumanises the female body and reduces it to a mere object to be examined.

Female bodies in the works of Atwood are never neutral sites but they are envisioned as battlefields through which women negotiate their identities.[159]

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[154] Macpherson, 41.

[155] Macpherson, 42.

[156] Atwood, "Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature."

[157] Margaret Atwood, "The Female Body," in *Good Bones* (London: Virago Press, 1993), 39.

[158] Atwood, 40.

[159] Davies, "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies," 58–59.

According to the scholar Madeleine Davies, Atwood writes the female bodies in accordance with the culture in which they are represented and that determines them.[160] This in turn sheds light on the cultural processes of society, which are always political. Politics is intended in the sense that Atwood herself defined, that is as "who is entitled to do what to whom, with impunity; who profits by it; and who therefore eats what"[161], and according to feminists, the ones who detain the power are males. Atwood's protagonists are usually powerless people who are caught in the traps set by the powerful.[162] As it emerges also in "The Female Body", women are closely watched by the power politics at work within patriarchy, that is always ready to chain them up, entrap them.[163] However, it is notable to underline that Davies also suggests that some women learn to see both themselves and others belonging to their gender through men's eyes, sometimes becoming incidental guards working for the same power structures that entrap them.[164]

It is not enough to discuss the role of women theoretically, and to grant a concrete example of the discrimination of women in society, it is both interesting and fitting to venture in a discussion about the position of women writers. Although a celebrated author, Atwood herself exposed the difficulty of being a woman writer, or more broadly speaking, an artist. Though we no longer live in an era in which women are denied the possibility of being part of the academic life, Atwood often commented on what it is like to be a woman writer as it brings with it an inherent paradox. The paradox relies on the idea that the concepts of "woman" and "writer" are envisioned as two separate things, and thus place the women writers in a double discriminatory position. In fact, the art of the "writer" is measured in "feminine" terms and she might be said to "*write like a man*, a "compliment" that stripped a woman of her gender and belittled her own contribution to literature."[165] On the other hand, the "woman" as such

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[160] Davies, "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies."

[161] Pilar Somacarrera, "Power Politics: Power and Identity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 51.

[162] Davies, "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies," 61.

[163] Davies, 62.

[164] Davies, 62.

[165] Macpherson, ""On Being a Woman Writer": Atwood's Canadian and Feminist Contexts," 39.

is still subject to patriarchal discriminatory laws, the same that are reserved for any other women,[166] thus implicating comments on both their behaviours and on their bodies. As any other woman who displays some kind of power, whether that has to do with a creative impulse or not, women writers are not exempt from the threat of being called names. Atwood herself has been frequently described in derogatory terms, such as "witch", "man-eater", or even "powerhungry Hitler".[167]

The complicated relationship between being a woman and being an artist is a topic that Atwood explored in several instances, even in poems such as "Spelling",[168] and it might be possible to glimpse a reflection of this discussion even in "Hairball". Kat is a content creator, and at the beginning of the short story she talks with Ger about the reasons why she was hired at the magazine.

> "That's why you hired me, isn't it?" she says. "Because I go way too far." But he's in one of his analyzing moods. He can see these tendencies of hers reflected in her work on the magazine, he says. All that leather and those grotesque and tortured looking poses are heading down a track he and others are not at all sure they should continue to follow. Does she see what he means, does she take his point? It's a point that's been made before. She shakes her head slightly, says nothing. She knows how that translates: there have been complaints from the advertisers. *Too bizarre, too kinky.* Tough.[169]

Kat's personality reflects in her work as a creator of total looks, she appears to be good at what she does, and what she does seems to be what the board of directors were looking for when she was hired. Nevertheless, her work now seems to be way out of line, it is even called "grotesque", and this is not even the first time that it happens. Her "tendencies" are "reflected in her work", and therefore the emphasised judging words are both referred to her work, and to her. She is "heading down a track",

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[166] Macpherson, 38–39.

[167] Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, 2.

[168] Sally A. Jacobsen, "Themes of Identity in Atwood's Poems and 'Rape Fantasies': Using the Norton Antology of Literature by Women," in *Approaches to Teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Other Works*, ed. Sharon R Wilson, Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Hengen (New York, 1996), 74.

[169] Atwood, "Hairball," 41.

that most probably leads to unruliness, it is the unholy track that leads women to be considered “bad”. It almost seems as if “tough” is not a compliment or an observation on her behaviour, it seems more of a judgement. It is “tough” to relate to a woman like Kat. This can be considered as a proof of her transgressiveness, a transgressiveness that disrupts order and makes both her figure and her job “grotesque”, different, other, monstrous. Her art is discriminated being not only the art of woman, but also the art of a woman that is inherently transgressive.

Thus, the women in Atwood’s writings are not exempt from discrimination as much as Atwood herself. Being called names is undeniably discriminatory, but the topic gets further complicated if one considers the discrimination as a consequence of the fact that Atwood uses narrative to contest the status quo of society[170], and she does so through the use of satire. Satire historically was attributed to male authors and described as a “mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule or scorn”[171]. Atwood is treated as an unruly, transgressive woman writer, who is called names, and this discrimination might be aggravated by Atwood’s tendency to write satire. In fact, women who write satire seem to be stigmatized because they threaten the stereotype of the woman “as noncritical, private individual.”[172] Furthermore, Atwood’s tendency to tackle stereotypes combined with the use of satire results in writings that challenge the male prominent position in society as well as the submission of women through the use of frequent satirical reversal of typical situations. Therefore, she manages to turn satire, a male weapon, against the concept of masculine weaponry.[173] Examples of that can be found from the very beginning of her authorial career, for instance in *The Edible Woman*, but are echoed in many of her writings, including “Hairball”.

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[170] Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, 6.

[171] Lorraine M. York, “Satire: No Woman’s Land of Literary Modes,” in *Approaches to Teaching Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale and Other Works*, ed. Sharon R. Wilson, Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Hangen (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1996), 47.

[172] York, 43.

[173] York, 45.

In addition to the fact that Kat is a woman and an artist, the idea that Kat is a Canadian woman returning to her homeland, should be discussed as well. In the case of Canadian women, there is yet another discriminatory factor that should be considered when analysing their role in society.

> The Canadian nation was founded by establishing citizenship as a legal and political category for white males; it excluded non-whites and women, and guaranteed the rights of those white male citizens over non-whites and women."[174]

This idea excluded from positions of power both non-whites, such as the natives, but also non-males, that is to say women. Women, and especially Canadian women were therefore silenced by a dominant male culture and had to learn to escape from the voicelessness they were relegated to and learn how to find a way to tell their stories anew.[175] As much as the first settlers believed that they could tame the Canadian wilderness, the patriarchal culture believed that by marginalising women in society they could be silenced, neutralised, tamed. However, as much as the wild fought back and gained the reverence of the man that inhabited and tried to domesticate that wilderness, Canadian women, and women in general, thanks to feminism and to their representations in literature, gained their voice back. In fact, in Canada, the process of exposing the truth of the marginalised individuals is something that appears to be very dear to Canadian writers. Contemporary Canadian authors tend to give a new voice to those who live outside mainstream culture, favouring the stories of marginalised and traumatised people.[176] Most of the women represented in *Wilderness Tips* are in fact trapped in their stereotypical roles of inferiority, and many of them will remain trapped there. However, their stories have been told, and the woman reader that happens to identify with one or the other character might be able to escape, rebel, change.

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[174] Goldman, "Margaret Atwood's 'Hairball': Apocalyptic Cannibal Fiction," 84.

[175] Donna Bennett and Nathalie Cooke, "A Feminist by Another Name: Atwood and the Canadian Canon," in *Approaches to Teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Other Works*, ed. Sharon R. Wilson, Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Hengen (The Modern Language Association of America, 1996), 35.

[176] Goldman, "Introduction: The Apocalyptic Paradigm," 27.

Atwood's heroines challenge the character roles that were made available by profiting of the influence of the feminist public sphere, offering examples of women that fit into the traditional Madonna/Whore dichotomy, but at the same time proposing an insight on what it means to be marginalised as a woman in everyday life.[177]

If Atwood's position concerning the representation, the objectification and the social role of women is made very clear, these are not her only preoccupations. The author over the years represented women who behaved very differently from one another, and that became exemplifications of the life of average women in society.[178] Atwood represented all kinds of behaviours, from the most docile to the most transgressive, but managing to avoid passing any kind of judgement. With her marked ironical tone and her frequent open endings, she leaves to the reader the possibility to reflect upon what they read about, representing her heroines at crossroad in their lives. Most of her heroines are ordinary people that find themselves beaten down by the rules of society, but that nevertheless manage to find inside of them the strength to transform themselves, mostly from naive women to resourceful heroines.[179] In doing so, her underlying feminist goal is scored even if it is not publicly declared, for through the life of her characters she manages to prove that any woman has the power to change her situation and escape submission.

3.2 Two levels of transgression

In "Hairball" Kat presents some features that allow to contextualise her character as a transgressive woman. In this short story the reader faces a woman in her 30s who underwent several abortions and changed numerous men, who is accomplished in her career, and has an affair with her married boss. Although these factors do not represent taboos anymore neither in literature nor in society, Kat's

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[177] Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, 6.

[178] Patricia F. Goldblatt, "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists," *World Literature Today* 73, no. 2 (1999): 275, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40154691.

[179] Goldblatt, 265–66.

transgressiveness is tailored to represent the liberated woman that after the second wave of feminism can take her life in her hands and be free to act how she wants. However, the character also shows how even liberated women are still torn between their freedom and the disruptiveness of their bodies. This is demonstrated by the fact that Kat's transgressions can be considered as part of the "no-no's"[180], the unspeakable acts that were not permissible in literature, however the story manages to represent transgression under a new light, rendering it understandable and reliable for the reader.[181]

The analysis of the short story leads to the conclusion that "Hairball" presents two levels of transgressiveness. If the first level of transgression is the inherent transgressiveness of the protagonist and has been discussed in the previous chapters in terms of intentionality of behaviour and is represented by Kat's conduct in relation to societal precepts, in the short story there is a second level that should be considered. This second level resides in the structure of the short story itself.

Atwood created a short story that reverses the typical modes of the traditional fairy tale. The author herself stated that she grew up reading Grimm's and Andersen's fairy tales, which can surely be considered as an important intertext in most of her writings.[182] According to critics, fairy tales have had cultural consequences in the sense that they contributed to the creation of a female self-image emphasising male adventure and power as opposed to female domesticity.[183] In traditional fairy tales, the female character is usually portrayed as the passive victim or the evil antagonist. The subversion of the roles, positioning the female character as the heroine of the story is a typical move of the feminist rewritings of fairy tales,[184] and "Hairball" seems to be

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[180] Atwood, "Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature."

[181] Shapira, "Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque," 63.

[182] Sharon R. Wilson, "Atwood's Intertextual and Sexual Politics," in *Approaches to Teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Other Works*, ed. Sharon R. Wilson, Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Hengen (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1996), 56.

[183] Roland Granofsky, "Fairy-Tale Morphology in Margaret Atwood 's 'Surfacing,'" *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1990): 52, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24780545.

[184] Granofsky, 59–60.

a revision of both the traditional and the feminist modes of fairy tales. It is therefore meaningful to establish the idea that fairy tales are able to condition the representations of female characters in literature, before connecting this generic backdrop to Atwood's short story. However, the revision seems to be parodic, for it imitates both the style of the traditional fairy tale and its feminist rewritings, but it does so to expose their limits and to move away from them, not to conform.

If in the traditional fairy tales the protagonist tends to be a male hero that attempts and succeeds in saving a princess from an evil counterpart, in "Hairball" not only the protagonist is a woman, but that woman cannot be identified neither as the Virgin nor as the Madonna counterpart of the Virgin/Madonna-Whore dichotomy. In literature it apparently exists a distinct pattern in which Madonnas tend to be the protagonists, while Whores are usually confined to antagonistic roles.[185] There is therefore a change in the gender of the central character of the story, but there is also a shift of the figure of the woman, that by becoming the central figure ceases to be a passive object and becomes an active subject in the story.[186] Furthermore, the active subject is not the stereotypical naïve girl that somehow oversteps societal norms only to engage in an adventure that serves as a warning for other girls, but it is a woman that is atypical in traditional cautionary tales as well. In addition to that, Kat seems to personify multiple traditional roles of the fairy tale: she is the rescuee, the princess in need of saving from entrapment, in this case entrapment in a male dominated and dominant world, but she also comes to cover the role of the stepmother/witch, because she is the one that entrapped herself in a specific environment. Furthermore, the role of the rescuer seems to be covered by Hairball, which is not even a living entity, that nevertheless offers to Kat a knowledge that drives her out of her position of subjugation. It is also notable that Hairball comes from the inside of Kat herself, and therefore might represent her subconscious. With this reading, the rescue comes directly from Kat, and in a sense, she comes to liberate herself from a position of subjugation.

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[185] Gottschall et al., "Can Literary Study Be Scientific?: Results of an Empirical Search for the Virgin/Whore Dichotomy," 3.

[186] Wilson, "Atwood's Intertextual and Sexual Politics," 60.

Even though the traditional plotline of the fairy tale is not respected, in "Hairball" Atwood maintains the general movement of the story from negative to positive. However, she changes the intertextual resolutions to represent a story in which marriage is not the climactic moment of the short story.[187] In this short story, as well as in many other writings by Atwood, the protagonist is not fulfilled in the moment in which she gets married; she is fulfilled when she breaks free from society's constrictions and regains her identity, not in marriage, but by reappropriating her life narrative.[188] Although traditionally women's stories end with marriage or motherhood,[189] Kat's story finishes with her liberation. The idea that Kat imposed on herself a structured narrative that insists on the intentionality of transgressiveness has already been explained in the previous chapter, and it is helpful here to better understand the fact that Kat liberates herself not only from societal labels that cannot but have too definite boundaries, but also from her own self-imposed overly structured life narrative. As discussed in the previous chapter, her life narrative doesn't seem to be balanced, as it is not a collection of re-elaborated life memories, but an outright invention. The consequence is that Kat, to stay "in character", does not allow herself moments of re-elaboration in the light of her lived experiences, denying to herself a reading of her desires, that suddenly fall onto her only after Ger's betrayal. Hairball uncovers in her a desire of motherhood and marriage, but her accomplishment does not reside in the fulfilment of that desire, but in understanding that those desires are, and can be, part of her own personality.

The climax of the story is reached in the moment in which the protagonist liberates herself, not in the moment in which courtship is finally fulfilled in marriage. In fact, traditional fairy tales represent the courtship leading up to marriage and the "happily ever after". On the contrary "Hairball" tells the story of a professional courtship that does not end in marriage between the male and the female protagonist who miraculously fall in love but leads to outright adultery. In the case of Kat, the courtship becomes a job proposal. "Gerald was scouting, Gerald was recruiting. He'd

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[187] Wilson, 60–61.

[188] Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, 17.

[189] Bouson, 17.

heard about her, looked at her work, sought her out"[190]. Gerald manages to seduce Kat into taking a job back in Canada. However, it is Kat the one that reverses the typical plot and seduces her married boss into adultery.

> [She] seduced Gerald at the first opportunity, right in his junior vice- presidential office. It was the first time Gerald had been seduced in such a location, or perhaps ever. Even though it was after hours, the danger frenzied him. It was the idea of it. The daring. The image of Kat kneeling on the broadloom in a legendary bra that until now he'd seen only in the lingerie ads of the Sunday New York Times, unzipping him in full view of the silver-framed engagement portrait of his wife that complemented the impossible ballpoint-pen set on his desk.[191]

As everything in the short story, the description of the seduction is filtered through Kat's eyes, and envisioned as an act of transgression. However, if the reader disentangles him/herself from Kat's perspective and considers the actions for what they are, seducing one's boss is a rather trite stereotype. While performing an act that in Kat's eyes seems daring, she is actually falling into a stereotype. This might confirm the idea that Kat doesn't seem to realise that by modulating her life according to the transgressive woman narrative she lost track of the reality around her, trapping herself into a stereotype.

Atwood often problematised the implications of marriages for women, interpreting it as a trap in which the woman loses her power and has to come to term with the limitations that patriarchal structures impose on her. Even if in "Hairball" there is no marriage but only adultery, Kat is anyway dominated by the dynamics of marriage that Atwood exposed in other writings. Following this reading, it is important to remember that Kat, even though not in marriage, has to continuously come to terms with the impositions of the board of directors even if she was promised to have a free hand at the magazine and has to submit to men's proposals. This is perfectly in line with the prototypical idea that "Women, it seems, must be made malleable to men's

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[190] Atwood, "Hairball," 46.

[191] Atwood, 47.

desires, accepting their proposals, their advances. They must submit to their socially determined roles or be seen as 'demons.'"[192]

Whereas in a traditional plotline the story ends with a marriage, in "Hairball" there is space to represent both the end of an adulterous relationship and the end of Kat's creative dream at the magazine. Kat doesn't seem very prone to accept to bend to the proposals of the male board of directors that control her work at the magazine, and therefore she is deemed as a "demon" and removed from her position. Ger is the one that started the courtship, and he is also the one that eventually fires Kat from her position in the magazine. After Kat moulded Ger in her image, it is fascinating to see how the creature turns back against her creator. Ger is Kat's doing, it is her work of art. She just acknowledges that when Ger broke the news to her and stole her job, he completed his transformation: Ger is Kat's replacement, she made him so much in her shape that he steals her job as well.

> How could this have happened—to her? When knives have been slated for backs, she's always done the stabbing. Any headed her way she's seen coming in time, and thwarted. Maybe she's losing her edge.[193]

Ger steals Kat's job even if he "couldn't edit a phone book."[194] In this context, Kat might be considered an example of a powerless person that falls in the trap set by someone powerful.[195] Once Ger becomes competent, he amplifies his inherent male power, and with a swift coup d'état he takes her place in the magazine. Once again, Kat did not realise that she is no different from other women, and as such she is subject to discriminations and subjugation. From his newly acquired position, it is not surprising that Ger adds insults to injuries.

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[192] Goldblatt, "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists," 277.

[193] Atwood, "Hairball," 53–54.

[194] Atwood, 53.

[195] Davies, "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies," 61.

> "I'll write you a good reference," he says. "Don't worry about that. Of course, we can still see one another. I'd miss our afternoons." […] He kisses her, a voluptuous kiss, or it would look like one to a third party, and she lets him.[196]

Both Ger's tone and kiss seems pretentious, almost bordering on mockery. It is a behaviour that Kat herself would have adopted earlier on but coming from a man it might be considered yet another demonstration of the power that men retain over women and their bodies. In a sense, it echoes the fifth section of "The Female Body", Atwood's 1993 poem: it compares the female body to an object that is used for other purposes, a mean to achieve financial goals. In that case as well the arrogance of someone who is in power and makes the most of his position is connected to a male figure, and it is connected as well as to the disposability of the female, although in the poem it refers to the replaceability of a female body that "[wore] out quickly"[197], while in the short story it refers to the supposed dismissability of a female Whore, signalled by Ger's suggestion that they can continue their affair even if he used her to achieve his goal and then fired her.

If the failure of a marriage is not contemplated in traditional fairy tales, in this short story Atwood goes as far as representing the failure of an affair. Usually, the failure of an affair is used to assert the dominance of marriage, but here marriage itself is represented as dangerous for women, who might get caught in a trap used to submit them to the dominance of the man, as will be discussed further on in this chapter. Furthermore, the failure of the affair represented in this short story is useful to expose the idea that women, even liberated women who at first sight seem to lay outside the clutches of the patriarchal control because they can think for themselves, are still not careful of "lurking predators in their landscapes."[198]

In "Hairball" the protagonist teaches something that usually traditional cautionary tales warn about. In fact, a cautionary tale is a story that is used to give a warning about something that might happen if the same or a similar pattern of events or behaviours is acted upon in real life. In this scenario, the reference is directed toward

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[196] Atwood, "Hairball," 52.

[197] Atwood, "The Female Body," 43.

[198] Goldblatt, "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists," 277.

cautionary tales that warn about the repercussions of female unchecked thinking, to those “narratives that give prominence to female bodily processes [which] have often been misogynous cautionary tales that used the constitutive elements of narrative to "read" the body as symbolic of a dangerous disorder”[199]. Cautionary tales warn against the dangers of deviating from the established path and teach socially acceptable female models which are here reversed: Kat’s story can be interpreted as a tale that corroborates the dangers of staying on the path[200] if that means surrendering to patriarchally imposed female powerlessness.

To overturn the tradition Atwood also manages to reverse the grotesque body/female misconduct dichotomy. The repugnance toward the female body envisioned as a monstrous, grotesque body still persist to these days, and Hairball demonstrates it. Kat’s female body produced something repulsive that has no resemblance to a child, on the contrary, it produces a benign tumour, big and hairy as a coconut.

> The hair in it was red-long strands of it wound round and round inside, like a ball of wet wool gone berserk or like the guck you pull out of a clogged bathroom-sink drain. There were little bones in it, too, or fragments of bone-bird bones, the bones of a sparrow crushed by a car. There was a scattering of nails, toe or finger. There were five perfectly formed teeth.[201]

Although Hairball has already been discussed in the previous chapter in terms of a wretched entity that has been expelled from Kat’s body and represents her raging and transgressive side, the analysis was limited to the re-elaboration of Kat’s life narrative after her “Self” became “Other”. In this instance, the analysis of Hairball as an entity that generates uncanny feelings takes a different direction, and dives into a reading of the grotesque body.

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[199] Shapira, “Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque,” 55.

[200] Wilson, “Atwood’s Intertextual and Sexual Politics,” 61.

[201] Atwood, “Hairball,” 40.

The imagery used to describe Hairball suggests a sense of disgust. Hairball comes to be the representation of the grotesque element inside Kat's female body, the part of her that generates disgust. In fact, Hairball is a fitting exemplification of that "body in the act of becoming" of which Bakhtin writes about: it can be called a "body" as it presents elements such as nails, teeth, hair, bones, even if broadly speaking, it is an unfinished creature that lacks the necessary structure to be considered "human". It is in the beginning of the short story that the reader comes to know that Hairball comes from the inside of Kat's body, she generated it like she might have generated a child. However, if we consider it as a grotesque element contained in Kat's body, the element that shook her balance and virtually infected her mind as to make it unruly as well, it is important to notice that after the operation Hairball is not inside of Kat's body anymore. Once again, the paradigm that connects a grotesque body to an unruly mind is represented in literature, but Atwood uses it to challenge the very dichotomy of grotesque body-unruly mind. In fact, if one comes to consider Hairball as Kat's raging, unruly side that has been expelled from her body, the connection between her grotesque body and her unruly mind disintegrates once the cyst is removed. Kat's transgressiveness can no longer be ascribed to the presence of Hairball, of a grotesque element in her body, especially because her most extreme act is performed once the cyst is removed from her body. Therefore, Atwood creates a break in the reciprocal connection between grotesque body and unruly mind, demonstrating how, and to which extent, the dichotomy as applied to every transgressive woman becomes fallacious and a mere patriarchal stereotype.

The grotesque is made visible, it is personified into an uncanny tumour that presides over Kat's mantel piece, and Kat is both the creator and the consumer of the spectacle that it generates.[202] Since the voice that comes out of a woman's body can be "associated with hidden dangerous knowledge"[203], the reader is likely to believe that

[202] Shapira, "Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque," 66.

[203] Davies, "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies," 66.

> Hairball speaks to her, without words. It is irreducible—it has the texture of reality, it is not an image. What it tells her is everything she's never wanted to hear about herself. This is new knowledge, dark and precious and necessary. It cuts.[204]

The cyst is given pathetic fallacy, that is the ability of speaking, and of having human feelings. Here, Hairball is irreducible, unstoppable in its declamation of truth, while at the beginning of the short story it has "a soul and wished her well."[205]

Hairball can be considered as an abject entity that Kat's body generated to represent and contain her unruliness. In Kristeva's theory of abjection, the abject is "death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part"[206]. Furthermore, abjection is connected with a feeling of horror which originated from "the loss of distinction between subject and object or between self and other"[207]. At the beginning of the short story Kat doesn't seem to be able to part from Hairball, it is taken out from inside of her violently, but she develops that ability once Hairball comes to have a meaning in her existence. Hairball might be considered as an abject entity that Kat's body generated to contain her unruliness, which is now outside of her body, it is detached from her and generates feelings of abjection. Hairball is born of Kat as a child, but it is no child at all. "Some people thought this kind of tumor was present in seedling form from birth, or before it. It might be the woman's undeveloped twin. What they really were was unknown."[208]

Davidson gives an interesting interpretation to Hairball in this context.[209] If Hairball is intended as Kat's twin, and it is, thus, granted the status of person, then Hairball is Kat's twin sister. As a woman, it has all of Kat's rage and transgressiveness, so much that her unruly mind did not allow her body to grow decently, it has the same

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[204] Atwood, "Hairball," 55.

[205] Atwood, 40.

[206] Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1982nd ed. (New York: Columbia Univertity Press, 1941), 4.

[207] Dino Felluga, "Modules on Kristeva: On the Abject. Introductory Guide to Critical Theory," 2011, https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html.

[208] Atwood, "Hairball," 54.

[209] Davidson, "Negotiationg Wilderness Tips," 184.

"insolence [that] used to excite"[210] Ger. However, Hairball can offer to Ger something that Kat could never grant him, controllability. Hairball the twin sister is an unruly woman, but a woman that can be sealed in a jar. "Put her on the shelf and she will stay there"[211], it is like her, but it will never go too far. Contrary to Kat, Hairball is transgressive but inoffensive, and could never seek revenge over Ger.

Hairball, interpreted as the grotesque inside Kat's body, is in fact no longer an image, it is now real, and so are Kat's desires of domesticity and maternity. Therefore, Hairball can be considered a gift from the inside of Kat's body, that grants her new knowledge and allows her to begin a process of reinvention of her life narrative, with updated desires and goals. This means that having a grotesque body does not lead to damnation only, but in the revised feminist grotesque paradigm it might also conduct to rebirth.[212] In this short story in which Kat's unruly body is still connected with ideas of transgressiveness of social norms, the female grotesque remains a symbol of disorder, disruptiveness,[213] but the experience of it tends to become positive for the woman who experience it.[214]

3.3 Polarisation of female figures

Broadening the analysis to feminist related discourses that are traceable in the short story "Hairball", the first thing that should be considered is the strong polarization of female figures, both inside the short story, and in relation to

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[210] Atwood, "Hairball," 41.

[211] Davidson, "Negotiationg Wilderness Tips," 184.

[212] André Pereira Feitosa, "The Female Body and the Cannibalistic Redemption in the Edible Woman: The Grotesque in Margaret Atwood," *Em Tese* 8 (2004): 59, https://doi.org/10.17851/1982-0739.8.0.55-63.

[213] Shapira, "Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque," 63.

[214] Feitosa, "The Female Body and the Cannibalistic Redemption in the Edible Woman: The Grotesque in Margaret Atwood," 59.

"Wilderness Tips", which, as established in the first chapter, is its directly connected story.

Two binary oppositions can be distinguished in relation to the polarization of female characters: one considers the role of the women characters and distinguishes them in two categories, the Whore/Lover and the Madonna/Wife, as we have already seen, while the second is a distinction based on the images connected to the description of female bodies. Nevertheless, it should be taken in consideration that even if two binary oppositions can be differentiated, they remain interconnected in an overall reading of discriminative narratives about the female gender.

Concerning the role that the characters seem to cover, Kat's identification as a Whore and a Lover contrasts with Cheryl, Ger's spouse, and Portia, the exemplification of the prefect wife that is among the protagonists of "Wilderness Tips".

The description that the reader has of Cheryl is quite long and descriptive.

> His wife, whom Kat encountered (and still encounters) at many tedious company events, helped to explain his gratitude. The wife was a priss. Her name was Cheryl. Her hair looked as if she still used big rollers and embalm-your-hairdo spray. Her mind was room-by-room Laura Ashley wallpaper: tiny, unopened pastel buds arranged in straight rows. She probably put on rubber gloves to make love, and checked it off on a list afterwards. One more messy household chore. She looked at Kat as if she'd like to spritz her with air deodorizer. Kat revenged herself by picturing Cheryl's bathrooms; hand towels embroidered with lilies, fuzzy covers on the toilet seats.[215]

Cheryl, whose picture stands on Ger's office desk, gives the reader the idea that she is one of those perfect suburban wives who dedicate their lives to the managing of the house, the education of children, the satisfaction of the husband, and the appearance of her perfect family. Cheryl doesn't seem to be one of the readers of Kat's magazine, she seems to be "behind the times"[216] both in her appearance, and in her attitude, an idea that might be symbolical of her attitude of a woman that is from

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[215] Atwood, "Hairball," 48.

[216] Atwood, 53.

another time, and thus that is still connected with the stereotype of the Madonna. It is Kat herself that creates a harsh distinction between her and Cheryl by commenting that she understood the reason behind Ger's gratitude. "And he was so grateful. "I can hardly believe this is happening," he said, more frequently than was necessary and usually in bed."[217] The reader is presented with a very detailed image of Cheryl that Kat creates in her mind. Since the description is filtered through Kat's imagination as everything else in the short story, it is not necessarily a reliable one, and might say more about Kat herself than what it says about her boss' wife. Cheryl is represented in opposition to Kat, and her way of living is measured against the image that Kat creates of herself. Evidently, Kat deems herself very different from Cheryl – more attractive, more sexy, more wicked. The thick coat of transgressiveness that coats everything that Kat is and does is just not present in Cheryl's life. This is the reason why Kat seems to consider her boring and predictable, unable of escaping from the monotony of her life, in which everything is in order and perfectly under control. However, Kat's imaginative effort doesn't necessarily correspond to the reality of things, Cheryl could simply be different from Kat without being as Kat describes her. Furthermore, her demonisation might be interpreted as an unconscious mechanism used to cover a latent envy for Cheryl, that will surface later in the short story in the silver frame scene.

Portia, from "Wilderness Tips", is another woman that seems to incarnate the stereotype of the perfect wife, and that has been chosen by George among the three sisters exactly because of the idea that she represents.

> Portia – lovely, small-boned Portia, with her velvet eyes – took off her shirt without a word and dove into the lake. She retrieved his dark glasses for him, smiling diffidently, handing them up over her small breast like a water nymph's on an Art Nouveau fountain, and he knew then that she was the one he would marry. A woman of courtesy and tact and few words, who would be kind to him, who would cover up for him; who would pick up the things he had dropped.[218]

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[217] Atwood, 48.

[218] Margaret Atwood, "Wilderness Tips," in *Wilderness Tips*, 2010th ed. (London: Virago Press, 1991), 230.

Portia's description is filtered through George's perspective, the man that will become her husband. Since the connection between "Hairball" and "Wilderness Tips" has already been established, it is safe to say that Portia's description is the description of a Madonna, as much as the description of Cheryl, that nevertheless comes from another point of view. In this case it is a man who is caught in the act of describing a woman that at first sight he deems perfect to become his wife. George doesn't even know Portia at this stage of the story, but he has no doubt about her qualities, she has all the qualifications to become a perfect wife. If Portia would be described by Kat, her description would most likely be more similar to the description of Cheryl, and therefore it might be safe to say that Portia and Cheryl both represent the "good" woman.

It is interesting to notice that the two male characters of these short story have something in common, as they both distinguish between a "bad" and a "good" kind of woman, and to each of them they assign either the role of the lover or the role of the wife. As much as Ger in "Hairball" reserves sex for her lover, the "bad" woman that transgresses social boundaries and impositions, George in "Wilderness Tips" decides to marry Portia, but nevertheless periodically engages in an affair with her sister, Prue. Prue seems to be a woman that resembles Kat for her insolence and her audacity, for her tendency to transgress even the vows of her multiple marriages. Portia knew about the relationship among her husband and her sister, but she never said anything realizing that he married her for other reasons. "It wasn't sex he wanted out of her. He'd wanted the other thing – the wifely white cotton blouses, the bassinets."[219] It appears clear that both Ger and George unconsciously apprehend the women in their lives with the Madonna/whore paradigm in mind, reserving domesticity for "good" women and sex for "bad" women.[220]

If the polarisation between Kat and Portia is recognized, and Portia is acknowledged as a mirror character for Cheryl, it might be possible to draw some

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[219] Atwood, 245.

[220] Töttrup, "The Complexity of the Female Role: A Study of Margaret Atwood's Short Stories Wilderness Tips, Hairball, True Trash and The Bog Man," 21.

conclusion on the psychological state of the three characters, and thus of their behaviours at the end of the short stories.

As previously stated, at some point in history Canadian women, as part of a minority in the country, needed to learn to use the voicelessness[221] to which they were relegated, and be heard. Neither Kat nor Portia are shown to be happy after the moment that disrupts the stability they have found in their lives, which is taken away respectively by a personal and professional betrayal, and by the husband's unexpected unfaithfulness on a sacred ground. On the one hand, Kat decides to choose the path of straightforward revenge establishing herself as a character that might be described as a "revenge glutton".[222] The theme of revenge has already been discussed in the previous chapter in the light of the narrative of the self, establishing that a Kat's revengefulness surfaces in the latest version of herself, "K.". This latest re-working of her life narrative is exemplified by the name change and is the one that better epitomizes the "revenge glutton", the character who is prone to direct its revenge outward to the source of her anguish. The protagonist does so by having Hairball delivered to Ger during a party that his wife Cheryl set up to celebrate the new work position that he stole from Kat. That is the moment Kat chooses to interrupt to stage her revenge.

> When evening has fallen and the party must be in full swing, she calls a delivery taxi. Cheryl will not distrust anything that arrives in such an expensive bag. She will open it in public, in front of everyone. There will be distress, there will be questions. Secrets will be unearthed. There will be pain. After that, everything will go way too far.[223]

Kat's state of great pain calls for a direct revenge on Ger, a revenge that bears both "all the rage" and her own creative signature.[224] Her act of revenge is explicit and

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[221] Bennett and Cooke, "A Feminist by Another Name: Atwood and the Canadian Canon," 35.

[222] Shuli Barzilai, "How Far Would You Go? Trajectories of Revenge in Margaret Atwood's Short Fiction," *Contemporary Women's Writing*, no. November 2017 (2018): 318, https://doi.org/10.1093/cwwrit/vpx029.

[223] Atwood, "Hairball," 56.

[224] Barzilai, "How Far Would You Go? Trajectories of Revenge in Margaret Atwood's Short Fiction," 327.

tangible, it comes in the form of an ovarian cyst in a fancy outfit, wrapped up as a gift. It is meant to be a message for Ger, but the consequences of their "dirty fling" will fall onto his wife as well as "secrets will be unearthed". Kat leaves to Hairball the possibility to tell its own truth, but it is this last extreme act that brings her out of her voicelessness, by making Ger and his family pay not only for their transgressions, but for all the oppressions that she suffered.

On the other hand, Portia in "Wilderness Tips" dips herself in the water after discovering his husband cheating with her other sister Pamela. It is not the cheating that hurts Portia as she knew about all of her husband's previous extramarital affairs, on the contrary it is his violation of the boundaries of acceptability that she imposed to him. "He knows where she draws the line; he knows the price of her silence."[225] However, George violates the only place that was considered sacred for their marriage by both of them, and at first sight Portia does not choose the path of revenge, but the path of self-imposed punishment directed inward, not toward her offender. She is a "glutton for punishment"[226], the kind of character that is a victim "of romantic attachments to men who default on their affective ties and commitments, revenge is beyond these women's horizon of expectations."[227] The lack of revengefulness brings this kind of women toward death, as it happens in the case of Portia. In fact, in the finale, the reader leaves Portia in a state of quasi-meditation dipping in the lake, suggesting a possible descent of the woman to death.

> She thinks of a boat – a huge boat, a passenger liner tilting, descending, with the lights still on, still not aware of the disaster that has already overcome them. She sees herself running naked through the ballroom – an absurd, disturbing figure with dripping hair and flailing arms, screaming at them, 'Don't you see? It's coming apart, everything's coming apart, you're sinking. You're finished, you're over, you're dead!'
> She would be invisible, of course. No one would hear her. And nothing has happened, really, that hasn't happened before.[228]

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[225] Atwood, "Wilderness Tips," 245.

[226] Barzilai, "How Far Would You Go? Trajectories of Revenge in Margaret Atwood's Short Fiction," 318.

[227] Barzilai, 320.

[228] Atwood, "Wilderness Tips," 250.

The ending insinuates that Portia is meditating about what will happen if she lets herself drown in the lake. If she commits suicide without leaving any note most of her family will know why she performed such an extreme act, and they will all feel responsible for her death.[229] The peninsula that is hosting her family house transforms into a sinking boat, that would disintegrate not only the relationships among the members of the family, but that would also leave them with a dirty conscience. She would, however, watch them and scream from another world, in that lapse of time between her death and the discovery of her body. As much as Kat, even Portia would still be silent, but her actions would speak volumes for her, bringing her out of her voicelessness.

The final states of Kat and Portia after their very different acts of revenge are opposites, one feels light and peaceful, while the other finally gets to scream, to manifest her anger. However, both of them manage to break their silence and to manifest their voices. If Portia can be considered a mirror character for Cheryl, since the two short stories are interconnected, it becomes also possible to imagine what will happen as soon as Hairball reaches its destination, or at least what could happen.

It might be considered telling the fact that neither the Madonna nor the Whore is shown to be happy at the end of the short stories. Both women are betrayed, but their final states are very different.[230] Kat reaches a state of peacefulness, while Portia is left disillusioned. According to the traditional roles, the Whore is the one that should be punished at the end of the tale, while the Madonna should be cherished, celebrated. By reversing the final moralising expectations concerning the ending Atwood works once again to demonstrate that the traditional feminine roles are insufficient to fully represent the reality of things. The two characters both suffer, and they both have to face life's injustices and male oppression, therefore acting out as a role model or a bad influence appears to be not relevant.

The second polarisation that is possible to pinpoint once again finds its roots in the distinction between the "good" woman and the "bad" woman, but this time it relies

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[229] Barzilai, "How Far Would You Go? Trajectories of Revenge in Margaret Atwood's Short Fiction," 328.

[230] Davidson, "Negotiationg Wilderness Tips," 184.

on a “body-based method of characterization”[231]. This means that the very different images evoked by the description of the bodies of Cheryl and Kat create a clear-cut distinction between the two women.

The description of Cheryl, although mediated by Kat’s mocking perspective, lays emphasis on her ability to control her body. Cheryl is described as a “priss”, her body appears contained, controlled at the point that she “embalms” her hair and is also able to decorate the rooms of her own mind with wallpaper. The specific word choice of the description of Cheryl is not casual, specifically the use of the word “embalm”. In fact, this word activates the semantic field of death and evokes the bodily stasis of corpses when they are prepared for the burial. Bodily stasis becomes the dominant idea in the mind of the reader when thinking about Cheryl, and this effect is essential to strengthen the traditional formula that sees bodily stasis as the visible sign of a conservative morality, thus of the exemplification of the “good” woman.[232]

On the other hand, Kat inhabits a body that is “leaking, or else festering”[233] on the inside, symbolising a body that is not stable, it is on the verge of breaking. Of course, according to the traditional paradigm, the woman that has an unstable body is a woman with an unstable mind, and so Atwood operates according to this idea when creating the character of Kat.

Another important thing differentiates the bodies of Cheryl and Kat, namely what their bodies produce, so to speak. Cheryl’s stable body and stable mind produces a child, while Kat’s unruly grotesque body produces an ovarian cyst big as a coconut. The mere fact that the cyst is an ovarian one determines the possibility to compare the two creatures, which both come from the womb, the part of the woman that defines her possibility of motherhood. The difference is not only in what the female bodies produce, but in the interpretation of that product by a male viewpoint in the short story, Ger’s. The male gaze is not alarmed by a body that produces a child within the boundaries of marriage, but it is altered by the sight of an ovarian cyst, a tumour, taken out from the body of his lover.

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[231] Shapira, “Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque,” 60.

[232] Shapira, 60.

[233] Atwood, “Hairball,” 54.

The fact that Kat produced something ominous like Hairball might be a hint to the inability of her body to produce a child, thus to the anomalous impossibility to reproduce, which is a characteristic proper of the female body. According to Yael Shapira, this is a symbolical hint to the possibility of Kat's exclusion from the domain of domesticity and motherhood.[234] However, it should not be forgotten that there is yet another possible interpretation of Hairball in the short story, that was suggested in the previous chapter but never fully investigated. This interpretation is linked to the discourse distinguishing women according to the capability of their bodies of bearing children. It should be noticed that Kat herself at some point in the story comes to consider Hairball as her child, and she states that explicitly on several occasions. For instance, immediately after the operation Kat asks the doctor if the mass could have started as a child, he excludes that option, but Kat will nevertheless consider it as her baby.

> Still, sitting here on the rug looking in at it, she pictures it as a child. It has come out of her, after all. It is flesh of her flesh. Her child with Gerald, her thwarted child, not allowed to grow normally. Her warped child, taking its revenge.
> "Hairball," she says. "You're so ugly. Only a mother could love you." She feels sorry for it. She feels loss.[235]

The extraction of Hairball from her body brings to light a desire for maternity that Kat was not expecting, probably a desire that she suppressed a long time before and sealed with bitter irony. "She learned to say that she didn't want children anyway, that if she longed for a rug rat she would buy a gerbil."[236]

The connection between woman and motherhood is not only a matter of biology, but also a cultural assumption. According to Kristeva, the idea that femininity is linked to maternity originates in the treatment of the figure of the Virgin Mary in Christianity: motherhood came to be recognized as the sole function of the female

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[234] Shapira, "Hairball Speaks: Margaret Atwood and the Narrative Legacy of the Female Grotesque," 61.

[235] Atwood, "Hairball," 55.

[236] Atwood, 45.

gender in society.[237] Much has been said by critics and academics on whether Kristeva's theories have a feminist agenda or not, however, according to one of her critics, her words have been misinterpreted. Oliver Kelly maintains that Kristeva tried to create her own discourse on maternity because all of our conceptions of motherhood have been extrapolated from various discourses on the topic, which might appear inadequate and harmful for women themselves.[238] She also maintains that Kristeva's stance on motherhood, that sees it as the sole function of the woman, needs to be read in a context that allows its decoding. In fact, the whole idea might be read differently. Women's oppression can be partially attributed to the idea that, as for the Virgin Mary, "woman" equals "mother" in the conception of Western society, and the problem lies in the fact that we are not able to separate the idea of a "woman" from the idea of the "mother".[239] Therefore, if a woman discards femininity, she is forced to discard motherhood as well.[240]

The connection between womanhood and motherhood has been established, and in "Hairball" it appears to be followed, up to a certain point. In fact, the situation is reversed in the moment in which Kat, a woman that suppressed her female side welcoming transgressiveness and power, and refused "dresses that looked like ruffled pillowcases"[241], proves that she did not refuse motherhood as well. Nevertheless, the two abortions that Kat underwent are another proof of the fact that the polarization of "good" and "bad" women continues to be present in society: Kat being a transgressive woman, cannot carry out her pregnancies. However, the abortions can also be considered as proofs of the fact that Kat is able to give birth not only to unformed, thwarted tumors, but that her grotesque body might actually be able to produce a child.

Furthermore, with the idea of abortions, Atwood brings to life another example of the subjugation of bad women. "The English men were very competitive; they liked to win. Several times it hurt. Twice she had abortions, because the men in question

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[237] Julia Kristeva and Arthur Goldhammer, "Stabat Mater," *Poetics Today* 1, no. 1/2 (1985): 133.

[238] Oliver, "Julia Kristeva's Feminist Revolutions," 103.

[239] Oliver, 105.

[240] Oliver, 104.

[241] Atwood, "Hairball," 42.

were not up for the alternative."[242] The impression that English men followed the path of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy emerges from Kat's words. The reader knows nothing about them, but it emerges clearly from Kat's words that none of the abortions were her idea, her wish, but men left her no alternative. In stating that men were the one that were "not up for the alternative"[243] Kat becomes the victim of an imposition made on her own body. A strong sense of coercion transpires from these words, echoing the experience of the nameless protagonist of *Surfacing*. In that case as well the victimization of the women is connected with the power to impose abortions on Whores, that is, lovers, and not on Madonnas, that is, wives. This might be considered a proof that the issue is not connected to the creation of a child itself, but it is connected to the fact that a child can be an obstacle if a man has it with the wrong woman.[244] According to Simone de Beauvoir, "Men universally forbid abortion; but they accept it individually as a convenient solution; they can contradict themselves with dizzying cynicism."[245]

Kat has been compelled to abort two times; her lovers took these decisions in her place. Now, a man that she created in her image imposes power over her, and deprives her not only of her job, but also of the version of him that she liked best.

Kat's choice of words is important, she says that "She wants to be in that silver frame. She wants the child. She's been robbed."[246] When Kat discovers her desire for domesticity and maternity, she realizes that she is the victim of robbery, that someone stole from her the life she could have had. Once she comes to know what she has been robbed of, it becomes interesting to try to understand who the robber is.

As discussed, in accepting the label of the transgressive woman that has been attached to her, Kat also accepted to be stripped away of the possibility to be also a wife and a mother, and thus of being in "the silver frame". In her case, her English lovers took away from her the possibility of maternity by compelling her to abort

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[242] Atwood, 45.

[243] Atwood, 45.

[244] Töttrup, "The Complexity of the Female Role: A Study of Margaret Atwood's Short Stories Wilderness Tips, Hairball, True Trash and The Bog Man," 19–20.

[245] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 606.

[246] Atwood, "Hairball," 52.

twice, but also the longstanding Madonna/Whore dichotomy induced society to deprive her of the possibility of domesticity, simply because she could not be considered the kind of woman that one would marry. Therefore, the robber is a pervasive male patriarchal culture[247], that one way or the other managed to limit her options, bound her life choices.

Furthermore, according to Wilson, the "robber" is also a "death-worshipping culture, a society in which art and the artist serve commercial military and colonial ends."[248] This idea might be traced in several Atwood's writings, and in "Hairball" as well. In fact, before her sudden realization, Kat seems to be part of that culture that uses art and the artist to oppress, conquer and sell ideas to people. In Kat's specific case, the end is to sell an untrue and unattainable model of woman, and thus a complete lifestyle, to women readers. In her job, Kat becomes an architect, a creator of bodily images that are imposed on women through the pages of the magazine.

> "It's simple," Kat told them. "You bombard them with images of what they ought to be, and you make them feel shitty for being the way they are. You're working with the gap between reality and perception. That's why you have to hit them with something new, something they've never seen before, something they aren't. Nothing sells like anxiety."[249]

Kat seems to be aware of what her job is, so much so that she tries to explain it to the board of directors as well. In this role, Kat might be considered as one of those women who are "trained in both self-surveillance and in exercising the surveillant gaze over other women"[250], and become "incidental policemen of the very power structure that excludes them."[251] Kat adopts a male perspective in order to survive in a male dominated world, but she also adopts behaviors proper of an oppressive patriarchal culture, and as an artist she becomes a "robber of life."[252]

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[247] Wilson, "Atwood's Intertextual and Sexual Politics," 57.

[248] Wilson, 57.

[249] Atwood, "Hairball," 49.

[250] Davies, "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies," 62.

[251] Davies, 62.

[252] Wilson, "Atwood's Intertextual and Sexual Politics," 57.

> She had become a creator; she created total looks. After a while, she could walk down the street in Soho or stand in the lobby at openings and witness her handiwork incarnate, strolling around in outfits she'd put together, spouting her warmed-over pronouncements.[253]

An example of the kind of women that Kat creates through the magazine and unknowingly oppresses is Anna, one of the main characters of *Surfacing*[254]. Anna is frequently described as a paper woman that does everything she can to remain desirable in the eyes of her husband, for example by never forgetting to wear make-up and dressing up like a doll. In doing so she allows him to annihilate her personality, she accepts to be eroticised and commodified.[255]

Kat might be considered part of the mechanism that oppresses women; however, she might also be considered the exemplification of the fragility and unattainability of the stereotype that she offers to the reader of the magazine. Kat is the actual prototype of the kind of lifestyle that she proposes to her reader.

> She could make anyone look beautiful, or at least interesting. It was all photography, it was all iconography. It was all in the choosing eye. This was the thing that could never be bought, no matter how much of your pitiful monthly wage you blew on snakeskin.
> Despite the status, *The Razor's Edge* was fairly low-paying. Kat herself could not afford many of the things she contextualized so well. The grittiness and expense of London began to get to her; she got tired of gorging on the canapés at literary launches in order to scrimp on groceries[256]

Even though her job is to convince people that they need this or that item she presents on the pages of the magazine, she realises that it is not the item that will grant

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[253] Atwood, "Hairball," 43.

[254] Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*, 2009th ed. (London: Virago Press, 1979).

[255] Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*, 44.

[256] Atwood, "Hairball," 44.

the reader "eminence and power and sexual allure, would attract envy to them."[257] However, she follows the same philosophy that she sells, and yet she is not able to afford many of the things that she pushes people to buy. She herself economises on food, probably just to be able to afford one or the other accessorize that reinforces her outside appearance. This is another demonstration of the discrimination of women: despite her job, she does not have an adequate salary that allows her to buy the same things that she publicises. Money belongs to men's world, a word that is still denied to her.

It is interesting to observe that fact that this is not the first time that Atwood pushes her readers to think about the woman's body as something that needs accessories in order to *be.*

> The basic Female Body comes with the following accessories: garter-belt, panty-girdle, crinoline, camisole, bustle, brassiere, stomacher, chemise, virgin zone, spike heels, nose-ring, veil, kid, gloves, fishnet stockings, fichu, bandeau, Merry Widow, weepers, chokers, barrettes, bangles, beads, lorgnette, feather boa, basic black, compact, Lycra stretch one-piece with modesty panel, designer peignoir, flannel nightie, lace teddy, bed, head.[258]

The second section of "The Female Body" enumerates a series of accessories and thus by definition things that are not compulsory, that are extra. Most of these things might be easily sold in Kat's magazine, some other, like "head" and "kid" are deliberately provocative, but also interestingly mentioned among the things that the body of a woman might or might not have as they are not important, they are "extra".

Kat actually might be considered as a "robber of life", she robs women's lives through the pages of the magazine, imposing a strong male perspective on her own gender. Thus, under this light, she might be one of those women that act as unconscious guardians of a prevailing patriarchal culture. Moreover, she also robs Ger of his life, firstly creating a factitious version of himself that she will come to regret, and then throwing a bomb to his domestic life. However, she also robs herself of her own desires, suppresses them under a veil of cynicism and irony, until the moment in which

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[257] Atwood, 44.

[258] Atwood, "The Female Body," 40.

her messy unruly body sends out a message for her, in the form of Hairball. In the run up to the end of the short story, the disruptive force that a woman's body has is not considered in Kat's life narrative, she ignored the signals that her body sent her. "Her life began to seem long. Her adrenaline was running out. Soon she would be thirty, and all she could see ahead was more of the same."[259] Being so absorbed in the version of herself that she created, convinced that she is in control of her corporeality, she is suddenly reminded that the body she inhabits does not care about the feminist achievements, and wants what it wants. It could be argued that the whole story depends on Kat's eventual listening to what her body wants to tell her, but until that moment Kat probably should have known better, as the foundation for her layoff were in front of her. The board of directors is among the forces that seek to contain Kat, the woman artist. "The board, on the other hand, felt that their readership should simply be offered more of what they already had. More fur, more sumptuous leather, more cashmere. More established names."[260] Since the board of directors is composed of men only, the refusal to give more concessions to transgressiveness might be envisioned as a symbolic negation of freedom to women by the patriarchal culture, especially in the light of the connection between journalism and the ability of scripting a life that has been discussed in the previous chapter. On the contrary, men appear to be motivated to keep the magazine about "good taste"[261], and thus moral, acceptable, especially after Kat defines fashion as "predatory and erotic."[262]

In this short story Atwood seems to place the blame of the emptiness of Kat's life on the power forces that dominate her life, her lovers and the all-male board of directors. Kat herself perceived her life as empty, "Part of the life she should have had is just a gap, it isn't there, it's nothing."[263] The author seems to blame not only the evil patriarchal culture that forced her to renounce to several things, among them domesticity and maternity, in the name of liberation from impositions and of transgressiveness, but also elaborates a scheme in which Kat seems to be equally at

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[259] Atwood, "Hairball," 45.

[260] Atwood, 49.

[261] Atwood, 49.

[262] Atwood, 49.

[263] Atwood, 54.

fault. As much as she thinks to know how empty her fashion tips are, she follows them anyway, probably believing that she would be exempt from suffering the consequences of covert oppression.

In the light of this latest analysis, it might be possible to conclude that it was not in the author's intention to relegate Kat to the domain of the unruly woman that is punished with infertility for her bad behaviour. On the contrary, Kat's story could be read as a disintegration of that paradigm that allows only "good" women to bear children: even women that made life choices that diverge from tradition are allowed to become mothers, to dream of domesticity and shy away from patriarchal punishments.

By having both the Madonna and the Whore suffer, the two characters, read with the help of a third one, Portia, demonstrate how the traditional feminine roles have now become insufficient to deal with the complexities of life, and how the emergence of the figure of the Strong woman is both beneficial and inevitable. The Strong woman condenses both the qualities of the Madonna and the qualities of the Whore, it is both sexualised and mother. This might be the direction toward which Kat is headed at the end of the short story, after one last quintessentially excessive act, because this "kind" of woman does not repudiate sexuality but includes the possibility of motherhood and marriage, suggesting wholeness.[264]

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[264] Tanzer, "Real Men Don't Eat Strong Women: The Virgin-Madonna-Whore Complex Updated," 489.

4. Concluding remarks

To conclude, it may be useful to summarize the general trajectory that was followed in this dissertation.

After a general introduction, the main core of the thesis has been presented in the second chapter which aimed at discussing the human tendency to narrativize lives and personalities. In this light, Kat's character and personality development might be considered as a literary example of the process of narrative construction of reality that applies to human beings in general. We have shown how Kat takes shape as a woman that is intentionally fashioned so as to be transgressive through the use of an overly structured narrative of the self.

The analysis took a decisive swerve when Kat as a character began to be considered as the representation of a human being that is female in gender. This came to be the main topic of chapter three, where it has been observed how Atwood managed to problematize the paradigm that connects women's unruly bodies to unruly minds by creating a distinction between Kat and Hairball, and therefore by separating transgressiveness from womanhood. This allowed a reflection on the unsustainability of the traditional gendered roles of women.

The whole trajectory finds its finish line in the interpretation of the final namelessness of the protagonist. In fact, at the end of the short story Kat seems to allow herself to revise her life narrative to include the desires for domesticity and maternity that Hairball revealed to her. Those desires were seemingly suppressed for years under an overly structured life narrative that left no space for what didn't mirror her transgressiveness. This idea confirms and reinforces the theories that envision human beings as narrativizing creatures that, to make sense of their lives and their words, need stories that arise from a re-elaboration of memories.

Furthermore, the ending of the short story also provides the reader with a literary example of the consequences of the imposition of ostracising patriarchal tenets on women, illuminating the idea that even if feminism broadened possibilities for women, they still need to become able to balance inner desires with societal expectations in order to avoid being totalized under stereotypical gendered roles and labels.

4.1 Coda: Surviving transgressiveness

As a sort of coda, I would like to retrace the steps taken so far employing a different approach, that is, reading the protagonist's trajectory through the lens of Atwood's theory of victimhood.

It is in her 1972 book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* that Atwood first theorised the Basic Victim Positions[265] that throughout the years helped the reading of some of her major characters, creating "a helpful method of approaching [Canadian] literature"[266] and consecrating the author as a writer of non-fiction as well. Atwood deemed important to discuss the position of victims represented in Canadian literature because she found "a superabundance"[267] of them in CanLit, and her theories may help to present some considerations on the final state of Kat which confirm the reading here presented.

It becomes clear rather early in the short story that Kat is "intensely interested in her own body, in anything it might choose to do or produce"[268] and her interest doesn't seem to be misplaced. In fact, most of Kat's story happens in the run up to the moment in which she finally listens to her body, to the truths that Hairball reveals to her. During that lapse of time, it might be possible to notice that Kat is living in a bubble that prevents her to see the reality of things. To better understand this idea, Mary Russo's take may be helpful. Russo sustains that Kristeva envisions the grotesque as the "undoer of narcissism and of all imaginary identity as well".[269] Hairball, as a grotesque entity, becomes in fact the reason behind Kat's disintegration of a life narrative in which she envisions herself as better that other women. Examples of this tendency is the fact that she knows that the fashion tips that she sells are empty,

[265] Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 31.

[266] Atwood, 36.

[267] Atwood, 36.

[268] Atwood, "Hairball," 39.

[269] Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (London: The Macmillan Press ltd, 1986), p. 213–29; Julia Kristeva, "Powers of Horros," in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1982nd ed. (New York: Columbia Univertity Press, 1941), 208.

but she, as a creator, knows how to use them to attract "eminence and power and sexual allure"[270] while her readers seem to be only blowing their "pitiful monthly wage[s]"[271]. Another example is her telling description of Ger's wife Cheryl.

These ideas are precisely representative of the initial state of in which Kat finds herself. In fact, Kat can be considered as the exemplification of a person that is in Position One, someone who denies the fact that she is a victim"[272]. In Position One Kat does not feel victimised, on the contrary, she feels better than the rest of the women she sees. The time that Kat spends in Position One is represented by the narration in the past tense in the short story and up until the moment in which Hairball is extracted from her body, Kat does not seem to realise that there is oppression in her life. Position One becomes a mean to explain Kat's initial narcissistic and imaginary identity that will crumble in the course of the short story.

> If anger is felt by Victims in Position One, it is likely to be directed against one's fellow-victims, particularly those who try to talk about their victimisation.[273]

And so Kat directs her anger toward her co-worker Dania, who claims that "she ought to sleep with an amethyst under the pillow to calm her vibrations"[274], but also toward Cheryl, who is described as a "priss"[275] because she behaves differently from her. Kat is part of the culture that oppresses women, she is an "incidental policemen of the very power structure that excludes [women]"[276] thanks to her job at the magazine, through which she dictates tips on how to be like her, without considering that her role has consequences. Another example of the fact that Kat is living in a bubble that does not allow her to see her victimisation is the irony with which she

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[270] Atwood, "Hairball," 44.

[271] Atwood, 44.

[272] Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 32.

[273] Atwood, 32.

[274] Atwood, "Hairball," 39.

[275] Atwood, 48.

[276] Davies, "Margaret Atwood's Female Bodies," 62.

covers the pain of the compelled abortions that she underwent in the past, without realising that she allowed men to convince her, thus denying her Victim-experience.[277]

The situation suddenly changes after Ger betrays her and steals her job, triggering an epiphanic moment in which Kat comprehends that she is a victim of male power structures that dominated both her personal life and her work environment. The realisation that "She wants to be in that silver frame. She wants the child. She's been robbed"[278] and the reaction that this generates goes hand in hand with the description of the Victim Position Three:

> To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept that the role is inevitable.
> As in: "Look what has been done to me, and it isn't Fat, it isn't the Will of God. Therefore I can stop seeing myself as a *fated* victim.
> […]
> Notice that:
> 1. In this position the real cause of oppression is for the first time identified.
> 2. Anger can be directed against the real source of oppression, and energy challenged into constructive action.
> 3. You can make real decisions about how much of your position can be changes and how much can't (you can't make it stop snowing; you can stop blaming the snow for everything that is wrong).[279]

In line with the idea that something "has been done" to her, there is a passage right before the end of the short story that can be used to demonstrate the fact that Kat suddenly feels victimised and also allows the exploration of the idea that even if possibilities for females broadened, a patriarchal societal configuration still exerts some power over women and their lives.

[277] Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 32.
[278] Atwood, "Hairball," 52.
[279] Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 34.

> Gerald comes in, kisses [Cheryl] lightly on the cheek. A connubial scene. His conscience is nicely washed. The witch is dead, his foot is on the body, the trophy; he's had his dirty fling, he's ready now for the rest of his life.[280]

The initial image reinforces the idea that men still retain the possibility to misbehave at will, without suffering the consequences. The witch is a typical metaphor used to indicate uncontrollable women, and in this context it suitably represents Kat as she feels a victim. In fact, she represents herself as an ominous corpse under the foot of the man that killed her. This is a powerful image that suggests that in the nineties Whores were still represented as the party that does not get to be part of any connubial scene if not in the form of a trophy, much like a stuffed animal hanged on the wall. Nevertheless, the end of the short story suggests that there might be some consequences for Ger as well after his "dirty fling" with Kat, when she herself suggests that her double, Hairball, will disrupt a domestic scene and create distress, unearthing secrets.[281] This might be symbolic of a change that Kat wishes to see in society, that could slightly move toward a reduced gender inequality in the domain of repercussions on infidelity.

In accordance with the numbered bullet points that Atwood presents in *Survival*, Kat realises that the intentionality in her transgressiveness is rendering her a victim of the patriarchal culture stereotyped ideas about women, that do not allow her to accept neither the desire for domesticity not for motherhood, desires that up until that moment she repudiated because she was totalised under the label of Whore. Hairball becomes the symbol of a desire of maternity that emerges from the depth of Kat's inner life, that has been exploited and suppressed for years in a society that deemed inconceivable for a misbehaving woman as Kat, a Whore, to desire children. In fact, the multiple abortions that Kat underwent represent the power that male individuals in society can exert on a woman that is not considered "fit" neither to take on the role of the wife, nor the role of the mother. The emergence of a desire of maternity in a woman like Kat appears to be greatly outside the boundaries of the stereotyped figures of both the Whore and the Madonna, but thanks to it Atwood

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[280] Atwood, "Hairball," 56.

[281] Atwood, 56.

succeeds once again in exposing the contradiction of pigeonholing women into strict stereotyped roles, a process that takes away possibilities of choices from their life narratives.

Men in Kat's life, both past and present, seem to be pointed at as the source of the oppression, therefore it is no surprise that Kat decides to channel her anger toward the closest member of that category, Ger. Furthermore, she dives into a series of considerations about her position which brings her to feel overwhelmed by soreness, "a sore from running so hard"[282], that well reflects the idea that Position One requires a lot of energy to be sustained. In fact, after moving past it, Kat seems to be physically exhausted.

Another thing needs to be taken in consideration is the idea that Position Three seems to be transitional.

> This is a dynamic position, rather than a static one; from it you can move on to Position Four, but if you become locked into your anger and fail to change your situation, you might find yourself back in Position Two.[283]

It is without commenting on what is going to happen that Kat takes her decision to send Hairball to Ger during a party at his house, and it is thanks to this last extreme act before the closing of the short story that it is possible to theorise that Kat does not recede back into Position Two displacing the source of her oppression to something greater than her, like society, or fate, or the will of God. Her relationship with Ger comes to be a synecdoche of her relationship with men in general, that tend to exclude her form their lives and abuse of their power over her. By having her revenge over Ger, she symbolically has her revenge over every man that victimised her – Kat disrupts Ger's world as men disrupted hers. The resolution is that the "witch" dies, her transgressive side seems to be abandoned, her forced transgressiveness in the form of Hairball renounced, as she walks away "light and peaceful and filled with charity"[284],

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[282] Atwood, 54.

[283] Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 34.

[284] Atwood, "Hairball," 57.

but most significantly, "temporarily without a name."[285] This might come to imply that by challenging her creative power into her plot for revenge, Kat evocatively removes "the external and/or the internal causes of victimisation"[286], and manages to move on to Position Four. In *Survival*, Atwood says:

> In Position Four, creative activity of all kinds becomes possible. […] And you are able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others' version of it (particularly of your oppressors).[287]

This foregrounds the fact that Kat moves toward a "kind" of woman of her own doing, that is neither Whore nor Madonna, thus obliterating societal expectation on her and embracing all sides of her personality and her desires that do not fit into one or the other category of woman. This is only one among the "steps in Atwood's novels for empowering women's subjectivities."[288]

Atwood theorised the Victim Positions as a helpful method of approaching literature,[289] and in this final section I decided to apply her method to Kat. I discovered an interesting method of envisioning Kat's trajectory in the short story that confirms and reinforces what this work has presented so far. In fact, Kat's strong life narrative, authored like a work of art, continuously accessible and consciously fashioned, paramount to live happily[290] becomes the indicator that she finds herself in Position One and denies her victimization. Her moment of reflection is triggered by the eventual recognition of her role as a victim and her creative revenge is accomplished as she is in Position Three. Her subsequent movement to Position Four is indicated by the

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[285] Atwood, 57.

[286] Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 35.

[287] Atwood, 35.

[288] Roxanne J. Fand, "Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride: The Dialogic Moral of a Nietzschean Fairy Tale," *Critique - Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 45, no. 1 (2003): 66, https://doi.org/10.1080/00111610309595327.

[289] Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 36.

[290] Schechtman, "Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View," 159–60.

acceptance of her position of ex-victim, and her unleashed creative power is directed to the resolution of her temporary namelessness.

In this context, it is important to remember that Atwood theorised that the Victim Positions model can be applied not only to the experience of the singular individual, but it can be applied to a social experience as well.[291] This leads back to the driving motive of this thesis. The main aim of this thesis was to demonstrate how and to which extent Kat is representative of both a literary theory that draws upon the process of personality construction, and of a cultural phenomenon that relegates women to specific gendered roles. The distinction between the two standpoints often became blurred, since the discourse on the behavioural pattern of the female liberated woman is itself a narrative that cannot be easily disentangled from the production of a life narrative in a more general sense, as much as the individual experience of victimization cannot be easily discerned by the position of the society that surrounds the victim. Thanks to an extensive analysis of the intentionality of her transgressive, it is possible to use Kat as the exemplification of a person that misuses her ability to narrativize her life. However, it becomes telling the fact that she feels the urge to move away from her initial overly structured narrative and create a new personality that takes in consideration her desires more than the impositions dictated by a patriarchal society. As Atwood stated in *Survival*, perhaps it is not possible to change one's position if society doesn't move as well "except by repudiating your society, or at least its assumptions about the nature of life and proper behaviour."[292] This dissertation investigated the life narrative of self-declared transgressive woman that is the protagonist of Atwood's "Hairball", whose story appears to be quintessentially similar to that of many women who need to learn to negotiate their personalities in order to reconnect with their inner selves and their desires, coping with the precepts of society without surrendering to them, and running the risk of ending up trapped in powerlessness.

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[291] Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 37.

[292] Atwood, 36–37.

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