

Transformation of the Protagonist in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the protagonist, Joan's relationship with her mother and its influence on her psychological development. She acquires a surfeit of fictional identities, one completely different from other. Joan's development through self-splitting, enactment of multiple roles to finally performing a ritual of death and rebirth denotes her escape into fantasies, and then her gradual realization of the stereotypes imposed on her. Moreover, it is through creative activities that a genuine understanding of the constraints both mother and daughter share is achieved and Joan herself is empowered to reject some of the stereotypes. Lady Oracle recalls the multiple voices from mothers, daughters, and female artists since the second wave feminism and expects the growth of female artists in Atwood's later novels.

Keywords: Transformation, Integrated self, Rejection, Gender stereotypes, Identity.

Introduction

The story begins with the narrator's fake suicide, "I planned my death carefully".^(Atwood p.1) The protagonist, Joan Foster composes popular 'costume. Gothic' aimed at female readers and as well, lives out the genre's fantasies of escape and transformation. As a slim, attractive adult, Joan conceals her former life, her unhappy childhood when she was chronically overweight. She conceals her secret identity. The relationships we have with different people throughout our lives are strong influences on us all. Our relationships with one another can define who we are, as well as the quality of the lives we lead. Strenuous relationships cause stress and unhappiness, while close, loving relationships are a source of support and comfort. Joan Foster, the protagonist in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, is a complex woman who has had more than her share of turbulent relationships during her life. From her childhood and teenage relationship with her mother, to her bond with her husband later in life, Joan's relationships are rarely free of turmoil and drama. These relationships definitely have an influence on Joan, impacting her as a person. The first major relationship in Joan's life is the one with her mother. Joan feels unwanted and unloved by her mother, who treats Joan coldly because of her weight problem. At first, Joan struggles to fit in with her mother's perfect vision of her and tries to live up to her mother's expectations. When she fails at this, Joan resents her mother's unbearable attitude and becomes antagonistic toward her. Joan's identity then becomes based on the opposite of what her mother expects and wants from her.

"At this time my mother gave me a clothing allowance, as an incentive to reduce. She thought I should buy clothes that would make me less conspicuous, the dark dresses with tiny polka-dots and vertical stripes favoured by designers for the fat. Instead I sought out clothes of a peculiar and offensive hideousness, violently coloured, horizontally striped. Some of them I got in maternity shops, others at cut-rate discount stores; I was especially pleased with a red felt skirt, cut in a circle with a black telephone appliqued onto it. The brighter the colours, the more round the effect, the more certain I was to buy. I wasn't going to let myself be diminished, neutralizes, by a navy-blue polka-dot sack."^(Atwood p. 84)

By doing all this she only wanted to annoy her mother. Her goal was to be her mother's opposition. The mother in the novel strives to be a fully capable housewife by giving dinner parties to her husband's colleagues and maintaining a spotless house.

To her, the biggest failure of her identity as a successful housewife is having a rebellious daughter, whose obesity is a contradiction to the stereotypical image of feminine beauty, and thus, a manifestation of the mother's failure to keep everything decent and within the confines of her control. Joan has no feelings for her father as she rarely spoke to him. She forms a silent identity with him. Her father also had no expectations for her. When Joan meets Paul in London, she reacts in a way that he will find acceptable and not to get irritated. This is a direct contradiction of the identity Joan assumed when dealing with her mother. Instead of going against Paul's wishes, Joan becomes passive. Her passiveness is easily visible during the beginning of her stay in Paul's home as his mistress. Instead of voicing concern of any kind, Joan simply lets Paul do as he will. That becomes the pattern with Joan as her relationship with Paul progresses. Her identity at this point is based on Paul. She is nothing more than an extension of Paul. Problems begin when Joan tries to break out of this pattern. Paul's tolerance and patience regarding Joan began to wither as she started to do more things for herself, instead of doing things that pleased him. "Paul began to have fits of jealousy. It was all right as long as I did nothing but loll around the flat, reading and typing out my Costume Gothics and going nowhere except with him." (Atwood p.158) Joan's identity had gone from being based on Paul's wishes to being based on wishes of her own, and the turmoil in her relationship with Paul grew until she left and moved in with Arthur.

However, Joan's relationship with Arthur is much like her relationship with Paul. Once married and settled down, Joan returns to her pattern of doing what she thinks Arthur wants and shaping herself in a way that will be more appealing to him. She lies to Arthur about her past, never telling him of her strained relationship with her mother or her battles with her weight, all in an effort to become the type of wife that she thinks Arthur wants. Joan feels that her real identity isn't good enough, so she creates one. Her primary goal is being an ideal wife for Arthur and making sure that he is not displeased with her.

"Though I was tempted sometimes, I resisted the impulse to confess. Arthur's tastes were Spartan, and my early life and innermost self would have appalled him. It would be like asking for a steak and getting a slaughtered cow." (Atwood p. 215) The poems contained in Joan's book give insight into how Joan really feels about her marriage to Arthur, even though she denies that the book is about him. Just as with Paul, Joan's first act of doing something for herself creates static in her relationship with Arthur. Joan goes even further and has an affair, further asserting her own needs and identity, instead of Arthur's. It is no surprise that she fakes her death and runs away from her life with Arthur soon thereafter.

Joan, the daughter in *Lady Oracle*, rebels against her mother but then sways between the two positions of a housewife and an artist. Despite her rebellion against her mother, who acts as cultural agent to transmit stereotypes and the conventional roles of women to her daughter and who transmits social mythology – fictional constructs into which Joan is expected to fit, Joan gets assimilated in the patriarchal culture through her mother's influences as well as social and cultural activities as taking school education, reading and writing Costume Gothic romances and watching Hollywood movies. Nevertheless, as an artist with abundant imaginative power, Joan is able to first survive social prejudices and then improve herself through fantasizing and creative writing, both of which help her work out psychologically and think through her relationships with her mother and eventually reject the stereotypes on women imposed on her as well as her mother. In other words, it takes a large part of her life and a lot more struggles on Joan's part to accomplish- a spiritual quest for artistic independence.

This paper examines not only the mother-daughter relationship in Joan's domestic household, but also her interpersonal relationships in her social arena and her creative process. The word 'mother' here means both Joan's biological mother, Frances, and her surrogate mother, Aunt Lou. The biological is engaged in a battle over Joan's body in which Joan's fantasies about the maternal body are played out, whereas the surrogate mother inspires Joan to identify with the stereotypical portrait of female artists in Hollywood films. Both mothers, nonetheless, cause her existence as multiple and divided selves, and her escapes into fantasies. However, through her development of multiple selves and her formation of psychic fantasies and creative fantasies by turns, Joan as an artist learns to integrate her divided selves into a coherent one, to release the mothers- she is obsessed with, and to reject stereotypes and conventions imposed on women.

This takes on significance when Joan decides to take her Aunt Lou's full name, Louisa K. Delacourt, as her pen name. Aunt Lou was the only person that Joan showed her true identity to, without putting on a performance. In the same way, Louisa K. Delacourt served as Joan's only outlet where she could be herself after Aunt Lou's death.

Throughout Atwood's novel, Joan's identity is determined by the relationships she has with the different people she encounters throughout her life. Joan spends a great deal of her life pretending to be a person that she is not. In her third novel *Lady Oracle*, Margaret Atwood gives us a very self-determined and active mother and a daughter whose life and writing are haunted by the mother. Moreover, it is through rewriting Costume Gothic conventions and telling her life story that Joan gains new awareness about her mother and her own identity. Joan, however, is "motherless" only in the second half of the novel, which makes *Lady Oracle* significantly different from the nineteenth-century women's realist novels. In other words, like many contemporary feminist writers, Atwood locates mothers' and daughters' problems in a variety of socially and historically specific situations. The mothers' voices in women's post-war literature become more audible and diverse, and this is especially the case after the 1960s and under the influence of the second-wave feminism.

Although the second-wave feminism started with a refusal of motherhood, as well as the familial constraints imposed on women by mothers, it discloses all kinds of inequality women suffer from in domestic and public spheres, those of mothers' included. The unhappy and raging mother in *Lady Oracle* is keen in transforming her appearance and the appearance of her house into the ones advocated in magazines, and her unhappiness, often recalled by Joan, bespeaks the war bride's maladjustment after losing her war-time power and having to succumb to domesticity. If it is difficult for a woman to be a mother in the midst of gender inequality and socio-economic exploitation, it is even more difficult for a woman to be an artist and writer. As women's voices get diversified after the 1960s, one of the most active voices is that of female writer's. In the female writers' treatments of mother-daughter relationships, moreover, diversification means a gradual shift of focus from the writings from the daughters' perspectives to those of the mother's or of both. In such a context, *Lady Oracle* is transitional because, instead of allowing the women of the other racial backgrounds, it focuses on the daughter, Joan Foster, who emerges at the end of the novel as a true artist and begins to understand the mother through creative writing. Writing, as it is for the female writers before her, is difficult for Joan, not, however, in the sense of getting published or becoming famous, but in the sense of finding her own voice and rejecting patriarchal ideologies and the stereotypes of femininity her mothers try to install in her.

The difficulties Joan, the artist has in rejecting her mothers and the social stereotypes of femininity, then, make *Lady Oracle* an interesting contrast to the preceding women's texts in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, in which the mothers are either rejected, missed, or celebrated. Not only is Joan preoccupied with the mothers and fantastic projections on them, she seems to take on various social stereotypes imposed on her easily and happily. In *Lady Oracle*, Margaret Atwood states that Joan's interaction with her mother in childhood, or the lack of it, has profound impact which can last into her adulthood. If Joan rejects the mother's attempt to trim her by binge eating, interestingly, through eating as well as through her infantile gaze, Joan identifies with the mother, both her good and bad sides. She fantasizes and plays different stereotypical roles in both her life and her work, and these playful but creative activities in the potential space serve for her to try out some stereotypical relationships so as to finally grow beyond the stereotypes as well as the plots of patriarchal romance.

This paper focuses on Joan's development through self-splitting, enactment of multiple roles, to finally performing a ritual of death and re-birth denotes first the daughter's prolonged symbiotic relations with the mothers, escapes into fantasies, and then her gradual realization of the mothers' limitations and the stereotypes imposed on her. To think through the mothers, however, does not mean to reject and move beyond the mothers as persons, rather, it means for Joan a genuine understanding of the mothers' and the daughters' problems. Moreover, it is through creative activities that such genuine understanding is achieved and Joan herself is empowered to reject some of the stereotypes. Indeed, Joan at the end may not be able to be free from all the gender stereotypes, but at least in her last novel she successfully rejects some of them.

Joan desires to expel the threatening bad mother from her psyche and to disentangle herself from the symbiotic bonding. In her unconsciousness, she experiences fits of anxieties because of the projection of a fantasy bad breast onto the biological mother that threatens to reduce her body, and in contrast, the sense of nourishment and security is attained by projecting the good breast onto binge eating and her surrogate mother, Aunt Lou. Besides splitting herself into the bad and good breasts and project her mother as the bad one, Joan experiences another kind of self-splitting in the process of her socialization. On the one hand, to survive in the social arena, she consciously divides herself into a kind auntie figure in school and a monster underneath.

On the other hand, Joan's surrogate mother, Aunt Lou, provides her with illusive escapes into fantasies, that is, romantic ideologies and the stereotype of female artists in Hollywood movies. Besides her ideological legacy, Aunt Lou literally provides Joan with a means to reject her mother: using the 'physical trimming' as a term of getting the aunt's inheritance. The biological mother-daughter symbiotic relationship is thus severed apparently, with the daughter Joan's running away to a self-constructed world of patriarchal fantasies and maternal shadows. In her adulthood, however, Joan falsely believes she can segregate fantasy from reality, for instance, she wants to draw a definite line between her affair with the Royal Porcupine and her marriage to Arthur, and such false belief induces her to be schizophrenic.

Yet, Joan's construction of fantasies has positive values. Through participating in transitional phenomena— role-playing, constructing fantasies, and writing— and realizing the impossibility of living in fantasies, Joan learns to integrate her multiple, yet divided selves and act meaningfully on them. The divided selves result from both her self-splitting to reject the mother and her attempts to socialize and attract the men around her. Joan does not passively repeat stereotypes of female artists and fantasies in Costume Gothics and popular culture. She actively constructs her own fantasy, that of the Fat Lady, and becomes more active in her engagement in the objective reality during her writing process.

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