



MARGARET ATWOOD'S "EVIL WOMEN" IN *LADY ORACLE*

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ABSTRACT

Atwood addresses a literary tradition and feminist cannon, and she tackles the question of why we perceive powerful woman as threatening beings and relegate them as "evil". Her characterizations re-signify the evil woman as a character who empowers protagonists to recognize and claim the power that may have stereotypically been cast as male. In Lady Oracle the protagonists have internalized self-other binary the evil woman established, and their acceptance of their subject position allows the evil woman to maintain the privileged self position. The protagonist's character development relies on embracing the internalized evil woman so they can finally recognize how they already possess some of these potent characteristics. She also addresses archetypes and tropes of the evil woman, but I also explore the way Atwood shift the focus from male-female relationship to female –female friendships.

Key words: *gender, female struggle, self-identity, cultural myths.*

INTRODUCTION :-

The powerful women have been bastardized within the literary canon, deemed 'evil women' because they transgress gender norms or desire power. Labels such as ball busters, wicked stepmothers, femme fatales, witches, hags and crones separated the 'evil women' from the 'good girls' of literature who did not challenge gender norms or desire power. The 'evil women', tradition had it, were out to satisfy their own needs and ignored their 'natural', feminine care-taking role, defined the patriarchal ideal that defined womanhood as dedication to one's husband and children. The 'evil woman' deserves a more thorough analysis to

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understand the intricacies of her character, specifically one that considers second-wave and contemporary portrayals of the evil woman by female authors such as Margaret Atwood who reject limiting characterizations that are either too negative or too positive. She did not banish the bitch from her novels, however, in fact, she embraced the evil woman and her evil women are smart, shrewd, cunning, and aggressive-traits that when possessed by a woman are often characterized, by both men and women, as malevolent, manipulative, overzealous, and cruel. But Atwood's evil woman may also be scared, loving, confused, or lost, they are multifaceted characters who do not succumb to archetypes and become stock characters with negative stereotypes stamped on them.

We discover how they vary their repetition of gendered behavior to achieve agency-and ultimately to show protagonists in her novel, *Lady Oracle*. The evil woman sometimes subverts gender norms by borrowing typically masculine behavior, while other times she upholds gender norms by repeating feminine behavior. In either case, she highlights the construction of gender and demonstrates how a more thorough understanding of the gender matrix leads the protagonists to power. Many Atwood protagonist struggle with the fragmented existence of artist and woman, traditionally personified in the famous folk tale "The Red Shoes". There, a little girl must choose between dancing and being a 'regular' girl with Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, she transfers the setting to contemporary Toronto, and re-imagines the tale as one woman's struggle to reconcile different aspects of herself.

In *Lady Oracle* Atwood concentrates on male-female power dynamics to however, here she begins to construct the theme she will further illuminate power relationship between women. Specifically, she examines the role a powerful woman-the evil woman plays in the development of protagonist Joan Foster, interrogating how Joan must learn to accept the evil woman's power in order to begin her subject development. As we will see, Joan lacks agency because she is 'lonely' and doesn't have culture, consuming its gender myths and remaining socially paralyzed in her social life through most of her teen years. She understands that she may be a much more powerful person than she had previously perceived. *Lady Oracle* traces the influences that inform power dynamics between women in a gendered society, investigating the female-female power relationships that govern-and are governed by norms of gender ideas.

Through Joan's first-person narrative, she shows that power dynamics start at a young age. Where young boys tousele on the playground, through a punch, or succumb to conditioning that admonishes crying because it is not behavior appropriate to "being a man" for young girls the dynamic are born from what Atwood deems girls prudery and snobbery, their byzantine social life based on whispering and vicious gossip". Atwood begins her exploration of female power dynamics when Joan, as a child, encounters the evil woman. Joan is ill

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equipped to negotiate the power dynamic between girls because she grows up overweight and socially isolated, and she has no close friendship. For example, Elizabeth, Joan's acquaintance from Brownies, initially appears begin to Joan admires Elizabeth's Brownie uniform, 'Plastered with badges like a diplomat's suitcase' (52). In spite of the initial impression of Elizabeth is an evil woman. When Elizabeth uses gendered behavior to achieve her goals and maintain her subject position, it highlights how gender construction informs power relations even at an early age.

While some of Joan's lessons about gendered behavior and power come through her Brownie acquaintances and her high school friendships, Atwood also demonstrates how a variety of discursive formations influence Joan to embrace societal ideals of masculine and feminine behavior. From the texton English tea biscuits boxes, which Joan finds morale building to Fellini and Walt Disney movies, popular cultural influences assume an authoring in Joan's gender conditioning that prepares her to interact with other girls and, as an adult, with other women. This cultural conditioning profoundly affects Joan's childhood and adult life, as she cannot free herself from her feelings of inadequacy and desire for societal approval within a gendered matrix. Reflecting on how she expresses heartache, Joan comments, "I never learned to cry with style, silently... as on the covers of True Love comics... it came out as a burlesque of grief, an overblown imitation like the noon rose on white rose Gasoline stations"(6). Joan absorbs cultural influences without analyzing about their implicit ideologies, instead re-imagining pop culture logos as symbols of romance, or emblems of escape from her mundane Toronto adolescence. Whether pulp romances or 'serious' poetry, newspapers or magazines, advertisements or political pamphlets, Joan continues to incorporate the gendered messages from society into her own point of view, believing in the promise of potential transformation these products intimate, a transformation these products intimate, a transformation from fat "outsider" to thin "insider" which she has longed for since childhood.

With the majority of Joan's gender lessons filtering through popular culture, she undergoes a process of internalization the Butler describes in the psychic life of power: "Power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordinating assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity"(3). Drawing on obvious popular culture examples such as pulp romances, as well as more subtly entrenched ones such as the advertising on hair care packages, Atwood show how the power that initiates as "external" via consumer messages and romance plots "presses" Joan into "subordination".

As if writing the advertising copy for her new identity, Joan uses the marketing language of the hair dye package to describe the instant transformation that she hopes awaits her. Piling up adjectives that might used to qualify a popular high school cheerleader "discreet", warm,

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honest, confident, regular, glowing” Joan displays the flair for description she brings to her own costume Gothic’ss. The attributes also indicate the subjectivity she desires, one of confidence, sensibility, and normality. For a girl who always stood out because of her weight and social awkwardness what Joan wants more than anything else is to be “regular”. Joan summarizes her desires earlier in the novel, commenting, “I was a sucker for ads, especially those that promised happiness” (27).

In place of genuine female confidantes with whom she can demystify cultural myths, Joan invests emotionally in the impersonal popular culture influences, intoxicated by the promise of transformation. Her lack of critical thinking skills to deconstruct advertising spin and cultural messages also prevents her from deconstructing a culture which practices a taxonomy of women that strives to clearly separate the good girls from the evil women. Gendered ideals cast the evil woman as undesirable and alter Joan from exploring the power the evil woman represents. Crucially, a large part of Joan’s struggle to accept the evil woman involves embracing the fictional evil women she creates in the costume Gothic romances she writes for a living. We observe Joan work through her struggle via the character Felicia in *Stalked by Love*, the current romance within a novel that Joan attempts to complete throughout the narrative of *Lady Oracle*.

Building on her interactions with popular culture, Joan pieces together an idea of female – female relationships that does not account for the evil woman. Joan feels like a misfit in female communities, mostly due to the trio of girls from her Browine troop- Elizabeth, Marlene, and Lynneled by Elizabeth, Joan’s first evil woman. We will also learn that as an adult Joan mistrusts female friendship, preferring to remain in the fantasy world she orchestrates in her head, furnishing role for herself that allow her to remain emotionally distant from daily interactions with other women. This protects her from the evil woman on a conscious level, but Joan grapples with the internalized evil woman who appears in each of her costume Gothic romances. Until she embarks on an understanding of the evil woman – specifically through her own writing – Joan will not be able to claim agency and find a subject position independent from cultural influences that mandate negative connotations of the evil woman. This is Joan’s critical journey that we observe through the novel.

Joan Foster grows up in Toronto, the only child of an unhappy mother and largely absent father. When Joan joins a local Browine troop, she discovers the evil woman and girl power politics instead of a benevolent community of acceptance. Joan successfully ‘reduces’ and escapes from Toronto for a new life in England, where she commences a love affair with a Polish count and embarks on a career writing costume Gothics under the pen name Louisa K. Delacourt. She returns to Canada after her mother’s death, and unceremoniously comments married life with political activist Arthur. Joan secretly continues her costume

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Gothic career, eventually writing and publishing a collection of poems in spite of her. The final section of *Lady Oracle* remains in the presents tense, oscillating between Joan's own reality and her attempt to finish her current costume Gothic, staked by love. As she writes, Joan begins to understand that Felicia, the evil woman in this novel, is not unequivocally "evil", but represents someone more dynamic than the rote heroines who symbolize "good" girls.

Joan opens the narrative with a fascinating confession: "I planned my death carefully, unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it" (3). Immediately we are intrigued – we might be dealing with a dead character narrating her past life or someone detailing the present from a more omniscient point of view. We are also immediately aware that this as – yet unnamed protagonist doesn't consider herself to be a powerful person, she is passive rather than active agent in her own life, which "meanders" and has a tendency to spread to get flabby, to scroll and festoon" (3).

Lady Oracle is no costume Gothic, however, for the majority of Joan's narrative occurs not in a foreign destination but in her homeland of Canada, a crucial mechanism for grounding the story in reality rather than fantasy. In addition, locating the greater part of Joan's story in Toronto anchored the narrative in a Canadian context emphasizing Atwood's nationalist commitment to a Canadian literature grounded in Canadian locales and experience. Atwood comments that her writing is "auto geographical", that is, although characters and storylines are made up, she draws heavily from real settings to characterize her novels.

Alternating between two diverse settings, then, stages a contrast of the real with the imagined, and this contrast encourages readers to question if Joan's escape from her "real" life necessarily facilitates a successful search for the answers to her questions of subjectivity. Against the backdrop of these contrasting environments, Atwood creates an additional layer contrasting perspective by orienting the narrative of *Lady Oracle* through Joan's adult, "thin" eyes.

Through Atwood's portrayal of Joan's childhood indoctrination to gender conditioning, we observe that even in girlhood gendered conduct maintains power structures and created a framework through which Joan perceives her identity and subjectivity. The complexities of Joan's struggle to understand the evil woman embodies in childhood friend Elizabeth persist into adulthood and manifest themselves in the writing of her current costume Gothic, stalked by love. Her relationship to Felicia, the evil woman in stalked by love, is crucial to Joan's character development, for we observe Joan's growing acceptance and understanding for the role the evil woman plays in her journey towards subjectivity. While her interaction with the evil woman begins during childhood with the Elizabeth from *Browines*, the relevant self-

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analysis that reveals itself through stalked by love is equally important to Joan's potential transformation.

At the end Joan wonders about the myth of a dangerous man in the ravine, questioning if a man the girls passed one day was a "bad man" or not. The truth escapes Joan, who even as an adult focuses on the threat imposed by males rather reflections are misplaced in terms of power relations, for the gendered power she witness on her trips through the ravine has nothing to do with the myth of the bad man. Rather, Elizabeth and the two girls present the real threat one of bodily danger if Joan cannot free herself from the bridge post – that relies on the gendered myth of a bad man while being executed politically and physically by the evil woman. The perceived threat of "bad men" exists to scare all the girls, and Elizabeth uses that myth to manipulate Joan. Adult Joan doesn't fully reflect on the power of the evil woman and the gender dynamics that inform this episode she still seems to catch up in the emotions of the episode. But Elizabeth remains a shadowy presence in Joan life, lingering to remain her of the power potential available to her if she chooses to embrace the evil woman. In fact, Joan's struggle to understand the evil woman returns through her costume Gothic's, where Joan finally confronts the role the evil woman plays in many aspects and stages of her life, including her development as a subject.

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