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碩士論文

女性自我之重塑：  
瑪格莉特·愛特伍德《女神諭》中的嘲仿志異

**Refashioning Female Selfhood:  
Parodic Gothic in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle***



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## 摘要

瑪格莉特·愛特伍德的《女神諭》是一部從多角度嘲仿志異的作品。愛特伍德不僅藉由嘲仿志異來探討志異小說的傳統，更深入思考此一傳統如何影響女性讀者，進而試圖為女性尋找走出此一傳統限制的可能性。愛特伍德的嘲仿志異從小說的女主角（瓊·佛斯特）展開，瓊本身就是一個浪漫志異小說的讀者與作家，身為讀者，瓊過度沈溺於志異的幻想中而於現實生活面臨許多窘境，她為自己捏造各種身份來解決問題，結果卻讓自己活得更像志異小說中被恐懼籠罩的女主角，直到她嘲仿自己的志異小說，才看穿志異小說背後性別建構機制，也由於這一層體悟給予她的多重身份新的意義和力量。值得注意的是瓊的問題來自於志異傳統最後解決於重寫志異，愛特伍德則由嘲仿志異而突破此文類的陳規，這種在問題內檢視問題的自我反省模式正是本文所欲討論的，自我反省的風格同為志異文類和後現代主義的精神，我將分三章來討論愛特伍德如何藉由嘲仿展現此一精神。論文第一章，首先經由回顧志異小說的發展歷史來呈現志異小說的傳統及其與女性讀者的關係，最後回到愛特伍德創造《女神諭》的時空背景來推論其創作動機；論文第二章，由瓊的志異創作和現實生活兩個層面來分析愛特伍德如何嘲仿志異文類；論文第三章，釐清瓊所面對的恐懼為何，以及其後她如何藉由重寫自己的志異小說而理解志異文類中性別建構的運作，最後走出恐懼面對自己。而愛特伍德對志異嘲仿同時也於瓊的自我反省和自我探索旅程中完成。

關鍵字：嘲仿、志異、後現代主義、瑪格莉特·愛特伍德

## Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, a story centering upon Joan Foster, a Gothic writer of Romance, presents a parodic vision of the Gothic conventions. In this novel, Atwood revamps and probes the Gothic conventions to reflect how people, particularly women, are shaped by them and to look into the im/possibility of constructing female subjectivities within a patriarchal ideology. There are two layers of Atwood's parody of the Gothic—the parody of Joan's Gothic works and that of her real life. In "reality," as a Gothic reader, Joan's dependence on the Gothic fantasy makes her a Gothic heroine on the run. Such a comedic vision becomes a part of Atwood's parody of the fixed feminine images in the Gothic conventions. On the other hand, Joan's problems about her relationship with her mother and her various identities will not be solved until she rethinks and rewrites her own Gothic tales. As a Gothic writer, Joan goes through three phases of Gothic creation in which she finally finds the exit from the Gothic maze. She releases herself from the Gothic conventions by parodying her own Gothic romances and her self-reflecting parody also bestows meanings upon her multiple selves. Through the postmodernist reading, the nature of self-reflexivity is clearly revealed in Atwood's parodic Gothic and it is also the self-reflexivity that endows Joan's multiple selves with the power to free herself from the confinement of patriarchy. Hence, in *Lady Oracle*, Atwood parodies Joan's life/reality and her Gothic writing/fantasy to undermine the seemingly realistic conventions of the Gothic from within. She successfully examines how gender is constructed in the genre, and how these constructions can be challenged and changed.

Key Words: Parody, the Gothic, Postmodernism, Margaret Atwood

## **Acknowledgements**

Writing a thesis is a journey for me through which I stumble and learn. At first, it even seemed to be a journey without an end. Searching for new ideas, making them coherent, and strive for the right words and the correct format are all a painful process of learning for me. Hence, I realize that this thesis does not solely belong to me. I could never accomplish it without so many people's help. I must express my respect and sincere gratitude to my advisor, Professor Pin-chi Feng. Without her instruction, encouragement, and endless patience, I wouldn't have enough confidence to finish my thesis in time. And I would like to say thank you to Professor Ying-hsiung Chou and Professor Kwan-wai Yu for their valuable suggestions regarding my thesis. I am also deeply thankful for the support and profound love from my family. At last my special thanks to my friends, Michelle, Irene, Myra, and Ginhan who always comfort me whenever I feel frustrated. Thanks for all of you to accompany me on my thesis journey.



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## Chapter One: Historical Review of the Gothic Conventions

### 1.1 Introduction

In her book, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, Linda Hutcheon designates self-reflexivity as a prominent feature of postmodernism, whose embodiment in the literary field is parody. Hutcheon proposes that parodies of literary conventions indicate the awareness that literature is made out of literature; this kind of self-consciousness further turns into a means to reflect and interrogate the traditional humanist belief. It is the parodic uses and abuses of the conventions that make parody a typical apparatus for introspection in postmodernist literature. From Hutcheon's point of view, Margaret Atwood's works, among postmodernist Canadian literary pieces, represent the illustration of such a parody of literary conventions.<sup>1</sup>

*Lady Oracle* is a story centering upon a Gothic writer of romance, Joan Foster, who has lived her life with multiple identities and is always fleeing from various difficult situations. Her tale begins right after her fake death as she tells her story to a reporter. The structure of a story about story-telling first implies its involvement of narrative self-reflexivity. More important, Atwood revamps the Gothic conventions rather than merely treating them as a style, and probes these conventions to reflect how people, particularly women, are shaped by them. In other words, with the Gothic as a thematic and a narrative device, Atwood reexamines, in a humorous tone, the Gothic conventions in *Lady Oracle* to undermine the mystique of the Gothic so as to explore the theme of female confinement. In my thesis, I intend to investigate, through a postmodernist reading, how Margaret Atwood revisits the Gothic conventions by means of parodies to look into the im/possibility of constructing

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of Canadian postmodernism and the relation of Margaret Atwood's works with it, see Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern*, especially 1-23 and 138-157.

female subjectivities within a patriarchal ideology.

Critical readings of *Lady Oracle* could be divided roughly into two contrary camps. Some stress that the multiple identities of the protagonist, Joan, is an illustration of her escape pattern from complicated reality, and what she tries to learn is how to piece her fragmented selves together to form an integrated self. Conversely, others perceive her various identities as a survival strategy which enables her to own subversive power against a patriarchal context.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Joan's multiple identities used to be deciphered as either an escape from reality or a strategy against patriarchy. My reading, however, emphasizes how Joan comes to realize the nature of reality and patriarchy through struggling among her multiple selves.<sup>3</sup> Only after she sees through the sexual polarity hidden in the mimetic realism of Gothic novels she has been reading can she turn her multiple selves into a weapon to fight against the fixed gender roles that the patriarchy imposed upon women. Thus I would like to study the process of Joan's struggle between reality and fantasy through which she gains the insight into the mechanism of the patriarchic gender construction.

My thesis is divided into three parts. In the first chapter, I aim to investigate how the Gothic style is viewed as a female genre by studying its conventions. I intend to focus on the Gothic tradition step by step, starting from the review of the development of the Gothic and its nature, and proceeding to the emergence of the term female Gothic, then to its major themes, especially that of escape, and finally to the social context in which Atwood creates a Gothic heroine on the run. The second part of my thesis consists of a close reading of the Costume Gothic Joan writes, and the dilemma she encounters in her real life, to analyze how Margaret Atwood parodies

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<sup>2</sup> For essays alluding to Joan's multiple selves, see Rosowski; Stein 41-63; Rao 64-73; Masse 250-264; Stales; Chen and Lee.

<sup>3</sup> In her M.A. thesis, "The Three Metamorphoses in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*," Chia-fung Lin holds similar viewpoints, contending that the protagonist's recreation of herself is a transformation. She analyzed it with the three metamorphoses in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

the Gothic conventions. Following the close textual analysis, I will proceed to study how Joan transforms her multiple selves into a strategy to fight against the imposed norm of ideal woman of patriarchy in the last chapter to examine how Atwood's parody of the Gothic demystifies the genre and suggests the possibility of an alternative female subjectivity.

## 1.2 Historical Retrospection of the Gothic Genre

First, the original Gothic pattern deserves an examination. A brief historical retrospect of the rise and fall of the Gothic conventions provides the basic understanding of the development of the Gothic.<sup>4</sup> Literary critics and historians mostly agree that Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764) starts the genre of the Gothic fiction. The genre has flourished from approximately the end of the 18th century when Clara Reeve publishes *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story* (1778), written in imitation of Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*. Near the end of the century, Ann Radcliffe, who distinguishes herself by *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and Matthew Lewis, celebrated for his creation of *The Monk* (1796), with other anonymous writers at that time, establish the tradition of the Gothic genre. Typically the Gothic conventions include medieval or remote settings, such as ruined abbeys, castles and graveyards, ghosts or supernatural power, tyrannical heroes and persecuted heroines. Mental stimulations, emerging from the gloomy castle, diabolical deeds, or even the enactments of licentious desires, are not only the source of terror but that of pleasure. This kind of overindulgence in fantastic ideas which challenges reason and morality constructs a subversive power of the Gothic. However, before long, the excess and clichés of the Gothic conventions make them a target of many

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<sup>4</sup> In this introductory historical overview I consulted Botting's *Gothic*, Geary's *The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction*, Kilgour's *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, and Punter's *The Literature of Terror*.



satires and parodies. Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1803), for instance, is one of the most outstanding examples. The prime of the Gothic novels did not last long, though the genre prevails. It is generally acknowledged that the Gothic heyday ended in the year when Charles Robert Maturin presented *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), a fantastic tale about wanderers; it is generally regarded as the last "true" Gothic text.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the Gothic mode, which in a broader sense delves into the dark side of society and the human psyche, has been transformed and incorporated into various other genres, instead of falling into demise. The gloomy Romantic heroes in Romantic literature, for instance, are greatly inspired by some Gothic images. The wanderers—a Gothic figure condemned to roam on the edge of society—is a typical Romantic hero of the Gothic mold, such as the one in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). In addition, a Byronic hero, alienated from the rest of the world owing to his extreme passion, is another transformation of Gothic villain. Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë is one archetypal example of the tortured Byronic hero with passions strong enough to destroy himself and people around him. Accordingly, Maggie Kilgour suggests that some might consider the Gothic as "a transitional and rather puerile form which is superseded by the more mature 'high' art of the superior Romantics, such as Coleridge, Keats, and especially, Byron [Lord Byron] who both realizes and renders redundant the gothic hero-villain" (3).

It is in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1831) that a new type of Gothic figure is created. The monster in *Frankenstein* is one both natural and unnatural, living and dead, human and inhuman, blurring all established boundaries. On the other hand,

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<sup>5</sup> In his introduction of *The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction*, Geary points out that critics generally agree that Walpole's *Otranto* (1764) inaugurates the age of the Gothic fiction, but they hold diverse viewpoints about its end. Some regard Maturin's *Melmoth* (1820) as the end; others think James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confession of a Justified Sinner* (1824) is the one.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) forges representative Gothic female heroines —the secret insane wife and the plain governess, reserved but talented, and the young innocent heiress. What is in common among them is the imprisonment from which they try to escape. Issues about the recurrence of the escape theme in the Gothic will be discussed later.

Later in the nineteenth century, the Gothic mode is continuously deployed within “the forms of realism, sensation novels and ghost stories especially” (Botting 113). In the mid-nineteenth century, the Gothic European tradition is further disseminated to the new world of North America where writers of the Gothic tradition, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allen Poe, attempt to free themselves from the Gothic conventions rooted in the European continent, to endow it with a new life within the American context. Eugenia C. Delamotte suggests that what they use is the “Gothicists’ techniques if not all of their material” (8). In other words, American novels in the Gothic style do not simply inherit the Gothic elements but display the transformation of them: for example, the replacement of wilderness for haunted castles. In addition to new forms of traditional Gothic images, the terrors of supernatural forces are also substituted for the dark corner in the human mind and society, like “mysteries and guilty secrets from communal and family pasts” (Botting 114-15). Meanwhile, Gothic writing is less discernible in Britain. By the mid-nineteenth century, the terror and horror of the Gothic are represented in “Ghost stories” and “sensation novels” in England. The difference of these types of narrative from the earlier time is that the realistic scenes take the place of supernatural mystery; for example, the urban Gothic in which representations of cities’ horror lead to an interrogation of social justice. The shifts of the Gothic conventions in both Britain and North America during this period are evident in “the domestication of the Gothic styles and devices within realistic setting and modes of writing,” because the

medieval background and the aristocratic villains are no longer the objects of terror in the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century (Botting 123).

What deserve more attention are the double and the vampire who are both conventional Gothic figures that reappear in two prominent Gothic texts: Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The former makes use of scientific devices to explore the shadow of human nature and the latter portrays supernatural forces as a part of natural world and human mind. With psychological research and scientific progress, both *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Dracula* show how Gothic fictions probe more deeply into the ambiguous territory of the social and human world, breaking the boundary between reason and irrationality, good and evil, life and death, and so forth.

In the last chapter, "Twentieth-Century Gothic," of his book, *Gothic*, Botting states that in the twentieth century "Gothic is everywhere and nowhere" (155). He points out that Gothic is represented in even more various forms: science fiction and horror films are two major types that refract the innermost fears and anxiety of modern people. The popularity of horror movies, in particular, indicates the universal uneasiness. Besides, works reflecting on modernity, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1916), could also be included in a more inclusive Gothic category.

Moreover, from about 1950 to 1990, a subgenre called New American Gothic appeared in the academic field. According to Punter, "New American Gothic is said to deal in landscapes of the mind, settings which are distorted by the pressure of the principal characters' psychological obsessions" (3). This trend accentuates degeneracy such as the distorted psyche of the protagonist and social decay. Through the use of first-person narratives, what readers see is not an objective world but a grotesque world of the distorted psyche of the protagonists. James Purdy, Joyce Carol Oates,

John Hawkes and Flannery O'Connor are the representative writers of this subgenre (Punter 3).<sup>6</sup>

It is to this territory of the Gothic that Atwood returns again and again, using its conventional motifs and its subversive nature. Gothic images and themes, such as female fears, ghosts, split self and so forth, circulate in Atwood's literary creation. For example, *Surfacing*(1972) is a ghost story; *Lady Oracle*(1976) is narrated by a Gothic writer, and the protagonist of *Cat's Eye*(1988) is haunted by the past and by her *doppelganger* Cordelia. Atwood's Gothic style fiction all show a high self-reflexivity by which she explores the attractions of the Gothic and deals with the issues about contemporary female culture, which will be probed more in the end of this chapter.

### 1.3 An Overview on Researches on the Gothic Conventions

In recent decades, the influence of the Gothic has recaptured critical attention. Scholars have devoted themselves to reexamining the genre's emergence, popularity, decline, as well as its formulaic content and its dark nature. The Gothic genre made its debut in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 as a new, original and even radical literary form, but soon degenerated into a stereotype and served as material for the satire in *Northanger Abbey* in 1803. The Gothic genre was extremely popular from roughly 1760 to 1820, with a rapid rise and fall. It is indeed not an easy task to give the Gothic genre an explicit definition. It can be viewed as a prelude to Romanticism, which includes many Gothic elements. From a historical viewpoint, it can also be seen as a reflection of the terror coming from the serious violations against monarchical orders, such as the French Revolution.<sup>7</sup> With its involvement with the

<sup>6</sup> Karen F. Stein offers another list of Gothic novels by women during this period: Doris Lessing's *The Four Gated City* (1969) and *the Summer before the Dark* (1973), Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Falling* (1973), and Sheila Ballantyne's *Norma Jean the Termite Queen* (1975).

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the connection with French Revolution, Kilgour, in her book *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, argues that the Gothic genre was originally "a part of the legacy of the English Revolution of

dark aspect of humanity and society, it is always associated with psychological or criminal fiction. With its abundant descendants which flourished after its supposed “demise,” the term Gothic has come to include an increasingly wider scope of works and categories, making it even more difficult to clarify the genre.

Consequently, it appears to be easier to analyze the Gothic genre through its conventions than its nature. The research into the form of the Gothic thus takes an “inventory approach” (Delamotte 7).<sup>8</sup> Academics tend to initiate their examination from conventional settings (for example, castles in ruin, haunted house with secret locked chambers, and gloomy yet sublime natural spectacles), characters (a persecuted heroine who is innocent and intelligent; a tyrannical hero who sometimes is also a villain; a villainess, and a talkative servant), and devices (plots such as a heroine, leaving where she grows up, undertakes a journey to an unknown place in which she encounters a threatening male) that are apparently repeated elements in the Gothic novels. However, analyzing the shared characteristics of a certain genre does not mean lifting the veil of its mystery, but might result in difficulties in constructing its unity from these fragmented pieces. Maggie Kilgour comments:

At times the Gothic seems hardly a unified narrative at all, but a series of framed conventions, static moments of extreme emotions—displayed by characters or in the landscape, and reproduced in the reader—which are tenuously strung together in order to be temporized both through and into narrative, but which do not form a coherent and continuous whole. (5)

Hence, the inventory approach to the Gothic has led to many debates. To get out of the impasse, re-investigating the original prototype of the Gothic in the eighteenth century is one workable alternative.

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1688” (13).

<sup>8</sup> According to David Punter, Eino Railo’s *The Haunted Castle* (1927), with its listing of themes and settings as one approach to study Gothic fiction, could be considered the beginning of the trend. (16)

The goal of the Gothic genre is not primarily to portray realistic characters or events but to arouse the extreme emotions of its readers by putting them in a thrilling, suspenseful and uncertain atmosphere, which explains why in the late eighteenth century it was believed that reading Gothic novels would bring about a corrupting influence on the morals of the readers.<sup>9</sup> It was generally feared by earlier conservative moralists that readers of the Gothic narratives, fascinated with the escapist imagination or indulging in mental stimulation, will ultimately lose family values and detach themselves from the social order and norms. The worries of the moralists are that the Gothic awakens something repressed in the human mind that is also contrary to the dominant principles of social values. Devendra P. Varma comments,

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries have been recognized as, in all essentials, dominated by a strict concept of reason.... The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a new recognition of the heart's emotions and a reassertion of the numinous. It was these factors that produced the 'Gothic' horror. (210)

The horrors born from the revival of those restrained emotions turn to be the source of the Gothic power of subversion. With the potential to recover a suppressed primitive and barbaric imaginative freedom, Gothic novels symbolize a threat to the tyranny of reason and to the constraining aesthetic ideal of order. Moreover, in psychoanalytical terms, the Gothic that reflects the return of the repressed is where "subconscious

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<sup>9</sup> In *Gothic*, Botting quotes T. Row's statements in *Gentleman's Magazine* (1767) to demonstrate the common thinking about moral degeneration at that time: "Tis not only a most unprofitable way of spending time, but extremely prejudicial to their morals, many a young person being entirely corrupted by the giddy and fantastical notions of love and gallantry, imbibed from thence"(26). In *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, Kilgour refers to a review of "Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle" in *Analytical Review* (1788) to show similar ideas: "The false expectations these wild scenes excite, tend to debauch the mind, and throw an insipid kind of uniformity over the moderate and rational prospects of life, consequently adventures are sought for and created, when duties are neglected and content despised" (7).

psychic energy bursts out from the restraints of conscious ego” (Kilgour 3). However, while the psychoanalytical approach to the Gothic has been adopted by many scholars, we need to explain further why the Gothic particularly enchants women.

John Frow, speculating on the nature of genre, once asked in his article, “Reproducibles, Rubrics, and Everything You Need: Genre Theory Today,” whether genres are theoretical or historical; through studying the proposals of Tzvetan Todorov and Hans Robert Jauss, he concludes:

If genres are actual and contingent forms rather than necessary and essential forms, they are nevertheless not arbitrary. And this in turn means that the “internal” organization of genre can be understood in terms of particular historical codifications of discursive properties. (1629)

Accordingly, we must reconsider the social background of the late eighteenth century with the rise of female interest in the Gothic in order to understand the nature of the genre.



#### **1.4 The Gothic as a Female Genre**

The emergence of the middle class in the eighteenth century is a crucial social factor that led to the popularity of the Gothic because it was the bourgeois women who were the main readers of Gothic novels. In her dissertation, Bette B. Roberts analyzes what was fashionable for women to read at that time from a social economic viewpoint. She proposes that at that time though women of lower classes were exploited ruthlessly in the factories, there emerged a new leisure group consisting of bourgeois women. These women were completely dependent for their living upon their men, whose fortune was sufficiently enormous to guarantee their wives and daughters a wealthy life. Hence, since bourgeois women were confined in the domestic space, they had more time to read. For middle-class women readers at the



end of the eighteenth century, the Gothic Romance not only filled up their idle time but exerted a compensatory function as escapist literature, providing pleasure and therapeutic value.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the Gothic novels were read primarily by women, therefore, can be viewed as one outcome of the transformation of social structure.

J.M.S. Tompkins's research of popular novels during this era further points out the significance of the circulating libraries. He asserts that three-quarters of the reading public were women and that the circulating libraries "catered especially for their leisure" (120). In addition, Eugenia C. Delamotte, while studying the Gothic from a feminist viewpoint, also alludes to how the Gothic novels flourished in the time of the circulating libraries. She points out that "The Gothic romance in the 1790s was one of the first varieties of mass-market fiction, associated with William Lane's profitable and prolific Minerva Press and with the relatively new phenomenon of circulating libraries" (8). This new phenomenon of circulating libraries brings about new issues as well—why was it the Gothic novels that attracted women? Which Gothic elements interest them most, happy marriages at the ending or the suffering and persecution suffered by those female protagonists? What do women want and acquire from reading the Gothic novels? In terms of psychological needs, does Gothic fiction satisfy women's desires or mirror their fear? More important, is Gothic fiction a reinforcement of the patriarchy system or an escape from confined domestic roles—in other words, do they bind or liberate women? There is no simple answer to these complicated questions because the dual nature of the Gothic is two sides of the same coin.

To study Atwood's parody of the Gothic as a reflection of patriarchy in *Lady*

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<sup>10</sup> For a thorough survey of the historical and social background about the relationship between the Gothic Romance and women in the late eighteenth century England, see Roberts's *The Gothic Romance: Its Appeal to Women Writers and Readers in Late Eighteenth-century England*, 1-58 and Punter's *The Literature of Terror*, 160-188.



*Oracle*, I am concerned more about the genre's wrestle with the dominant ideology. Putting the dual nature aside, Gothic novels, with a great many female readers, have always functioned as a feminine space for communication. Michelle A. Masse also alludes to her positive attitude toward the Gothic and declares that "the secret knowledge of the subversion is preserved, guarded, and passed on among communities of women in the Gothic" (252). Through exploring domestic topics, female writers voice their discontent under the patriarchal system through this genre, since the medieval background of Gothic novels not only veils women's criticisms but simultaneously offers more room for them to articulate their ideas about society. Gothic themes about female persecution gradually expand and evolve into gender issues, including female sexuality, identity and fear: for example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) which illustrates attitudes in the nineteenth century toward women's physical and mental health and themes regarding motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

Gothic novels thus work as a communication space where feminine issues can be discussed. Though the Gothic transforms with time, early Gothic narratives and feminine themes of the Gothic are frequently embedded within new works, such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1978), Aritha van Herk's *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* (1986), and A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990). Susanne Becker states that this "neo-gothicism—the feminine excess in postmodern times— promises new, exiting dynamics for the textures of gender and culture" (13). Among the mixture of various generic conventions in Atwood's works, including those of Greek myth, fairy tales, realistic novels, autobiographies, romances and so forth, indeed draws a great many critical

attentions.<sup>11</sup> The recurrence of the Gothic themes creates an intertextual network, which plays an important role in postmodernism inasmuch as it indicates the nature of self-reflexivity. As Linda Hutcheon suggests, “It is precisely this intertextuality that brings about a direct confrontation with the issue of the relations of art to world outside it—to the world of those social, cultural, and ultimately ideological systems by which we all live our lives” (9). In other words, the network of intertextuality endows the old tradition with new life, endowing it with a potential to reflect and examine contemporary society.

Consequently, because of its popularity with women, both as writers and as readers, the Gothic has been a prominent part of female culture and some critics even go so far as to name it a woman’s genre. Nevertheless, even though Gothic fiction has always been popular with female readers, it was not until 1978 that Ellen Moers coined the term “Female Gothic” to identify it as a specific subgenre that explores the relationships between mothers and children. In the following year, 1979, Gilbert and Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic* to examine Victorian literature, among which are included several Gothic novels, from a feminine viewpoint.<sup>12</sup> They draw their title from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* in which Rochester’s mad wife is locked in the attic, and argue that female writers in the nineteenth century were metaphorically “madwomen” on account of the strict gender construction enforced upon them. Madness, as Gilbert and Gubar contend, is a symbol of female anger and revolt. Later, more and more critics reexamined the relationship between the Gothic and female issues. In her essay on reading and writing the female Gothic, Pin-chia Feng furthermore argues for the necessity of the term “female Gothic,” not only

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<sup>11</sup> Essays about Atwood’s re-visitation of literary conventions have been studied by many critics; for some examples within the last ten years, see Kolodny, Rao, Stein and Wilson.

<sup>12</sup> The works Gilbert and Gubar examine cover pieces by Jane Austen, Mary Shelly, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot and Emily Dickinson.

because the Gothic deals with female gender issues but also on account of its ideological significance of domesticating women, like other female genres such as “conduct book” and “the female *Bildungsroman*.” Feng proposes that these three female genres, in terms of the educational function, all direct the sexual drive to reading so as to consolidate the established moral standards. The main difference of the Gothic from the other two genres lies, however, exactly on the Gothic’s potential subversive power, for it also teaches middle class women readers the forbidden knowledge in their life circle (Feng 14-16).

However, along with forbidden knowledge, the Gothic novels present unrealistic expectations of an idealized life that echoes the patriarchal values. The Gothic ending disposed to return to the order seems to indicate that for both heroines as well as readers the domestic space is the only appropriate destination of women’s adventure. The logic that a momentary subversion of order must be followed by the restoration of a norm renders the Gothic, like the carnivalesque, only a temporary subversion against order. As Kilgour argues, “Reading is thus a dangerously conservative substitute for political and social action, offering an illusory transformation to impede real change by making women content with their lot, and keeping them at home-- reading” (8).<sup>13</sup> The duality of the Gothic genres reminds us of Stephen Owen’s comment that “The politics of genre is intensely territorial, and the hinterlands of a genre are often contested territory” (1389).

When confronted with the interaction between the Gothic genre and the

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<sup>13</sup> Some critics think that, compared with the thrilling adventure in the text, the moral teaching in the end has less influence on readers than the breathtaking escape. The moral conclusion does not obliterate the pleasure of reading terrors. Robert Keily, for example, proposes that the moral commentary “does not address itself to and certainly does not “solve” the psychological problems which have been so impressively raised earlier” (253). On the other hand, some argue that the conventional ending of the Gothic is because all the novelists, many of whom are middle-class women, know is dissatisfaction and anxiety, and they are thus not always totally in control of their fantasies. (For the detailed discussion of the related issues, see Howell’s *Love, Mystery and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction* 5-27.) So with such a weak ending, the subversive potential of the Gothic is still in doubt.

dominant ideology, critics have different perspectives toward this interaction. On one hand, some critics regard Gothic fiction an accessory to the patriarchal ideology. For instance, though investigating the dual nature of the Gothic, Kate Ferguson Ellis still connects the rise of the Gothic with the vision of an ideal heterosexual family. Bridget Fowler similarly argues that traditional Gothic fiction makes women rely more on the family myth than before. While attempting to decode the formula of Gothic genre, Bette B. Roberts considers the formulaic plot of the Gothic to be a passive struggle of female protagonists against the tyranny of male villains, yet with virtues rewarded at the end. On the other hand, Susanne Becker argues that the Gothic is situated between the dominant ideology and the resistance to it. Janice Radway, being more optimistic, further contends that even though what Gothic genre produces is a dominant ideology of a patriarchic society, reading could still be reactionary and subversive. With particular emphasis on the interaction between reader and text, Radway suggests that the very act of the reading desire may reveal a reader's dissatisfaction about the *status quo*.<sup>14</sup>

With contradictory interpretations of the Gothic, Michelle A. Masse's theorization of the genre connects both obedience and subversion with the Gothic genre. She argues that Gothic subversion, unlike aggression, undermines domination from within and the secret knowledge of it lies exactly in its seemingly non-resistance, which echoes the passivity of the Gothic heroines. Masse thus concludes that the apparent obedience of the Gothic heroines is a style of self-assertion rather than surrender.<sup>15</sup> Faced with these diverse arguments, we can be sure that it is on its

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<sup>14</sup> Concerning those perspectives mentioned above see Ellis's *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*; Fowler's *The Alienated Reader: Women and Romantic Literature in the Twentieth Century* and Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*.

<sup>15</sup> In her article, "Subversion and *Lady Oracle*" Masse, besides presenting her attitude towards the Gothic, discusses how Joan Foster adopts the strategy of "aggression" and "subversion" to resist the patriarchy ideology.

fluctuation between obedience and subversion that the Gothic genre survives and flourishes. This agreement prompts another question—what have long women submitted to? In other words, what do women long to escape from through reading this escapist genre?

### 1.5 The Gothic Genre as Escapist Genre

Imprisonments and escapes have always been prominent Gothic themes. For example, escape from the castle and home is a common plot of the Gothic narrative. During the late eighteenth century and the heyday of the Gothic, women were restricted in their domestic life under the domination of patriarchy. Reading for them was a way to escape from reality. The adventure the heroines experience and the persecution imposed on them both give pleasant sensations similar to sadomasochism.<sup>16</sup> Whereas escape stands for the metaphoric meaning of release from cultural containment, the escape from the imprisoning castle symbolizes the power of mind over the external circumstance. The theme of escape means so much to readers that some Gothic critics lay more emphasis on the theme of escape than on the perfunctory moral conclusion at the end. For example, Fred Botting explicitly points out:

The escape from confinement, in narrative or reading, is no more than a prelude to a welcome return. The ambivalence remains, not only in the way that the home seems to conceal horrifying secrets but in the possibility that the escape, especially for readers, into imagined worlds and events may be more pleasure than the return to domesticity. (70)

It is obvious that what readers desire is that ambiguous world in the Gothic novels

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<sup>16</sup> See Feng's "Writing and Reading Women/Women Writing and Reading—the Female Gothic and *Frankenstein*," 12.

where escape from reality is possible, rather the dichotomous world outside.

Nevertheless, Tompkins reminds us that the meaning of escape varies with time. “It is, however, only at the end of our period that the attention of the novelist was turned to the prison-breaker; the early romance writers, who were mostly women, saw in the prison one more example of their favourite virtue, fortitude” (89). The attitude to the escape theme in the eighteenth century is different from that in the nineteenth century. It was in the nineteenth century that more and more writers explored issues about evading the external constraint. In their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar take *Jane Eyre* (1847) as an illustration for rebellious feminism. They contend that the subtext of the anger and destructive power of the imprisoned madwoman, Bertha Mason Rochester, stands for an exemplary theme of the nineteenth-century women’s writing.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, from a study of Wilkie Collins’ *The Dead Secrets* (1857), Tamar Heller suggests that what Collins has presented is not only a narrative of women’s submission but also “a plot of feminine subversion that resembles a narrative pattern feminist critics have identified in nineteenth-century women’s writing” (3).

Aside from the varied perspectives of escape with time, what women ultimately struggle to escape from is the prescribed ideal feminine image and gender-construction. The escape theme in the Gothic narrative evolves from escapes from castles/haunted houses/ domestic spheres into counteraction to the ideological enclosure of femininity in the binary gender construction. The Gothic genre creates anti-realism/fantasy to resist the patriarchal master narrative of a coherent and unified subjectivity. To be more specific, the Gothic produces the most grotesque literary female figures, such as madwomen or monstrous feminine images so as to ridicule the formulated feminine model. Becker even contends, “The resonant ‘madwoman in the

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<sup>17</sup> See *The Madwoman in the Attic* 336-371.

attic' is a clue to the attractions of Gothic form for feminine fictions" (10). The fascination for the Gothic is that it foregrounds the hidden horrors of a unifying image of woman to make female readers face up to their anxiety and fear.

The escape theme draws us back to rethink the effect of such a metaphorical gesture. Does the Gothic transcend the everyday world regardless of its ambiguous ending? Furthermore, is the Gothic a contradictory tale itself or a critique of the order? There are more than two hundred years between Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Atwood's *Lady Oracle*. Does Atwood successfully provide an alternative exit for the Gothic readers in her parodic Gothic?

### 1.6 Contextualizing *Lady Oracle*

In her overview of fantasy, Rosemary Jackson comments: "Like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it" (3). The fantastic mode and the protagonist's fantasy in *Lady Oracle*, as Jackson has suggested, are a reflection of the social context at that time. While Charlotte Brontë presents certain typical types of early Victorian women's lives—poor governess (Jane Eyre), passionate wife (Bertha Mason), and young heiress (Blanche Ingram)—in *Jane Eyre*, how does Atwood contextualize women's lives of her time in *Lady Oracle*? How does Atwood reach to reflect on contemporary female culture by reexamining a literary tradition?

To understand thoroughly Atwood's parodic treatment of Gothic conventions in *Lady Oracle*, it is necessary to consider the context within which *Lady Oracle* was conceived. Gothic Boom (1960-1970) and the second wave of feminist movement (1960-1980) may very possibly be two major social phenomena which influenced



Atwood to choose the Gothic conventions as the major subject matter in her fiction.<sup>18</sup>

Connecting Atwood's *Lady Oracle* with the Gothic boom, Becker suggest: "In a postmodern recognition of popular culture, Atwood's self-consciously Gothic fiction deals with this important phenomenon of contemporary female culture, and explores the attractions of these pulp romances" (12). Moreover, the Gothic Boom also makes Atwood directly face the collapse of genres. From Hutcheon's point of view, the boundary between genres may be blurred but are not unrecognizable. Literary conventions are played in postmodern art form like parody's uses and abuses of the texts and the traditions. In a postmodernist refashioning, the Gothic, like other genres, becomes a suggestion towards appropriation or misappropriation, as Jameson indicates. Punter points out, that around 1960 to 1970, in the popular culture, the term Gothic was adopted by publishers to sell "a particular genre of paperback historical romance... a medley of slightly perverse romance and tame supernaturalism" (2). Becker calls it "the explosion in paperback romance market" (12). Speaking of the concept of genre, Fredric Jameson suggests genres have in fact been "literary institutions or social contracts between a writer and a specific public" (106) where "with...the opening of the work of art itself to commodification, the older generic specifications have been transformed into a brand-name system" (107). The Gothic, as a brand-name, does not "die out but persists in the half-life of the subliterate genres of mass culture" (Jameson 107). It is easily available in drugstores and again acquires a specific group of female readers, as it did two centuries ago. From Jameson's point of view, the political significance of such a social repeat is related to the work of capitalism. Yet besides economic transformation, why does the Gothic capture Atwood's attention after two hundred years?

During the 1960s and 1970s, whilst women actively demanded social and

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<sup>18</sup> For Gothic Boom and related issues, see Susanne Becker's *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*.



economic equality, the return of Gothic novels simultaneously indicated women's contradictory feelings about the simplified order as implied in the Gothic tradition. In her book, *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, Karen F. Stein observes and comments on the relationship among the popularity of Gothic novels, social change and women at that time:

Because the Gothic mode reveals anxiety about the changing place of women in families, it may be that times of changing social roles lead to the production of Gothic fiction. Atwood wrote her first three novels in a time of feminist political activism that saw a flowering of Gothic novels by women.... These ironic, darkly humorous novels conclude ambiguously, with their protagonists poised to encounter new possibilities, but the outcome is uncertain. (58)

Stein's argument indicates that the horror which Gothic has always reflected is female anxiety to the change of social expectations. Facing the possibility of new women's roles which the feminist movement may bring out, women shed their uneasiness in the Gothic genre.

Such an association, based on social factors, corresponds to Bette B. Roberts's examination of the reason for the Gothic Romance appealing to women in late eighteenth century England. "In the genre of gothic fiction," states Roberts, "they create an ambivalence of a more social than psychological perspective" (51). Roberts suggests that the rise and popularity of the Gothic Romance is related to various social transformations, such as "the emergent middle-class sex role of delicacy and domestic idleness, and their repressed desire to escape from it" (51). The observations of Stein and Roberts about these two periods of Gothic popularity show that Gothic fiction, to some extent, mirrors women's anxiety about their social roles in a patriarchal society. While the Gothic starts to spring up in the late eighteenth century, the middle-class women are the main readers, for whom reading Gothic tales is a way to fulfill their

fantasy about fleeing from their domestic roles. The return of the Gothic two hundred years later reflects a different social condition. The major readers are not restricted to middle-class women but include lower-class women as well. What contemporary women struggle to free themselves from is not only the domestic space but a new role that the second-wave feminist movement may bring out. The social expectations of women have changed with time; therefore what women face in the twentieth century is a more complicated situation than that in the late eighteenth century.

If the feminine ideal has changed with the coming of the second wave of the feminist movement, then what kind of attitudes were women in the late twentieth century supposed to adopt when facing the conflict between the traditional female role as a wife in the domestic sphere and those new models as economically independent career women? Becker calls it an era of “neo-gothic” when “images of career women and new fathers, alternative modes of family organization and single parenting mark the way toward a new post-feminist [or] post-patriarchal culture. Neo-gothicism reflects the feminine dimensions of the ongoing cultural and literary change” (4). Nowadays women’s fears are restricted not only in the domestic space but involve ongoing social expectations, including various tags created by the media to label women.<sup>19</sup> In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood seems to be a prophet who foresees this social phenomenon that has become more and more obvious today, and she knows that the route away from these constraining labels is the mobility which could be observed from the protagonist in *Lady Oracle*.

While it is becoming harder and harder to define the female norm today, Atwood’s exploration of female subjectivity in her parody of Gothic can be viewed as

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<sup>19</sup> Actually at the beginning of the twentieth-first century, more and more tags with degrading implications were produced by media, such as some terms in Japanese culture— rotten girl (腐女子), underdogs (負け犬, women past thirty, not being married, similar with Spinster [剩女] in Chinese) and kan butu on na (干物女ひものおんな, women in twenties who make no effort to have a social life).

“a reaction to... the feminine ideal of the time: *Woman* as produced by totalizing discourses of femininity” (Becker 160). In Karla Hammond’s interview, Atwood herself also alludes to her curiosity about the relationship between women and the Gothic:

I’m interested in the Gothic novel because it’s very much a woman’s form. Why is there such a wide readership for books that essentially say, “Your husband is trying to kill you”? People aren’t interested in pop culture books out of pure random selection. They connect with something real in people’s lives.<sup>20</sup>

If pop culture books are somehow connected with something in reality, then what is the relationship between Gothic plots about suspicion of husbands’ murder and women’s anxiety for their subjectivities, as opposed to the social expectations demanded by the patriarchal ideology, as discussed above? Let us read the text more closely to see how Atwood reflects this question in the next chapter and ultimately goes beyond the patriarchal discourse embedded in the conventional Gothic narrative in order to present other options for women to build a flexible subjectivity of their own.

Before analyzing by what means the protagonist, Joan Foster, breaks the constraint of the customized formality, we need to give attention to how Atwood presents that of the Gothic. Geary suggests “What is needed to move beyond vague generalizations and stereotypes is an examination of how particular Gothic novelists manipulate inherited literary motifs and conventions so as to create a fictional mode which diverges from earlier literature” (4). Corresponding to Geary’s proposal, the approach Atwood takes to expose the stereotype of the Gothic is to parody it.

Therefore, after the brief introduction of the Gothic Conventions and its

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<sup>20</sup> All interviews with Margaret Atwood mentioned in this thesis are quoted from *Margaret Atwood Conversations*, edited by Earl G. Ingersoll.

relationship with women in the first chapter, I will proceed to examine how Atwood parodies this genre in *Lady Oracle*. Among the various subgenres of the Gothic, the target for Atwood's parodies is Costume Gothic, a framed form which has long been popular with female readers. My thesis explores two layers of parodies—Atwood's parody of the Gothic conventions and Joan's parodic re-creation of Costume Gothic. The second chapter is about Atwood's parody of the Gothic and the third chapter concerns Joan's. In the former section, I plan to study how Atwood presents the formulaic nature of Costume Gothic by parodying Joan's Gothic works and Joan's real life. In the latter section, I try to examine how Atwood leads Joan, who represents Costume Gothic readers as well as writers, to parody her own Gothic writings. In my opinion, this design not only releases Joan from the stagnant Gothic conventions but also revives the subversive potential of the Gothic genre. In other words, Atwood employs the subversive nature of the Gothic to critique and poke fun at the formulaic nature of the Gothic conventions so as to further interrogate the ideological underpinnings of this genre.

In the next chapter, I intend to investigate Atwood's treatment of the Gothic reader's dilemma between reality and fantasy, namely what dangers readers who believe in the Gothic imagination will encounter in a real world? First, I will see how such a topic is treated before by taking "The Story-Haunted" (1837) as an example. Then, I will continue to study the Costume Gothic that Joan Foster writes to illustrate how Atwood parodies the formulaic nature of Gothic romances. Following this, because both *Lady Oracle* and *Northanger Abbey* discuss the influence the Gothic exerts on readers, I will make a short comparison between them. Finally, at the end of the second chapter, I will examine those romantic fantasies that Joan Foster indulges in until she suspects that her husband tries to murder her, from which the effect of Atwood's skilful reversion of the conventional Gothic plots will also be discussed.

Following this, I will analyze the way in which the Gothic fantasy leads to Joan Foster's struggle between fantasy and reality in the third chapter, beginning with her tangled relationship with her mother because of her obese body. Through this investigation, I will examine the norms prescribed for women as those that conventional heroines show in Gothic novels. At the end of the third chapter, I will focus on how Joan's parody of her Gothic writing makes her multiple selves function as an agent of mobility against the fixed roles for women.



## Chapter Two: Refashioning the Gothic Conventions

### 2.1 The Danger of the Fantasy in the Gothic

Confronting the dual potential of the Gothic genre – the domination of the patriarchal ideology and the potential subversive power against it – what is the attitude that Margaret Atwood adopts for her interpretations of the Gothic conventions in *Lady Oracle*? In an interview with Joyce Carol Oates, Atwood expresses her interests in the Gothic myth which is also what she attempts to break away within *Lady Oracle*:

[T]he center character [of *Lady Oracle*] is a writer of Gothic romance partly because I've always wondered what it was about these books that appealed—do so many women think of themselves as menaced on all sides, and of their husbands as potential murderers? And what about that “Mad Wife” left over from *Jane Eyre*? Are these our secret plots?

The hypothesis of the book [*Lady Oracle*] insofar as there is one: what happens to someone who lives in the “real” world but does it as though this “other” world is the real one? (75)

In fact, Atwood's experiment about one's dilemma between the world of real life and that of fantastic novels is not an original one, since there have been numerous debates over the reader's ability to handle the extreme emotions Gothic novels provoke and the moral degeneration that might follow it. The negative consequences of reading the Gothic have thus been emphasized in a number of Gothic narratives as well, in which the heroines, by indulging in reading, suffer from their own imagination and sensitivity and the loss of their abilities to discriminate between art and life.

An example from the past offers us a chance to see the evolvement over the two hundred years. “The Story-Haunted” (1837) is a work with an intention to warn

against over-indulgence in fictitious terrors.<sup>21</sup> The protagonist of the tale is a young man who has difficulty differentiating between the world of the Gothic and reality. He was brought up in a solitary library, reading romances to his mother. His mother dies in terror as the protagonist reads aloud one Gothic tale in which a man is pursued by his own phantom. This young man is thus left alone and enters the real world. However, he is entirely unfit for the society since he views everything literally based upon those Gothic romances he reads. The protagonist, haunted by stories, later falls in love with the specter whom he images, who has all characteristics of the heroines in Gothic romances.

It is in Gothic tales such as “The Story-Haunted” that the most powerful critiques of the nature of simulated reality in the Gothic are presented. Maggie Kilgour considers it to “internalize external criticism” (7). She further points out that the enchantment of the Gothic lies exactly in the fact that it satisfies readers’ desires by embodying their imagination while punishing it simultaneously.<sup>22</sup> The example of “The Story-Haunted” indicates that the Gothic has always been a highly self-reflected literary form. Kilgour’s statement testifies to this perspective; she argues that the Gothic is “a highly wrought, artificial form which is extremely self-conscious of its artificiality and creation out of old material and traditions” (4). This kind of self-consciousness of the artificiality in the Gothic tradition is also the base for self-reflexivity in postmodernism. The former reveals the nature of simulation in literary works, while the latter discloses that literature is made out of literature. In this

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<sup>21</sup> The “Story-Haunted” is one of the tales Edith Birkhead provides in her book, *The Tale of Terror* (1921). In this book, Birkhead does not emphasize the problematic nature of the Gothic but makes a complete introduction to the major Gothic texts that have survived the aggression of the history. The online book is available at Project Gutenberg.

<<http://infomotions.com/etexts/gutenberg/dirs/1/4/1/5/14154/14154.htm>>

<sup>22</sup> Kilgour takes Caleb Williams Godwin’s *Maria* and Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* to discuss how desires are realized through imagination which creates an illusory substitute for desire. (85-7, 156-8) The danger lies in the madness coming from too long indulgence in the fantasy which “may create a world that is an alternative to reality but can never transform it” (86).

respect, both of them manifest an awareness of the nature of fabrication in literary creation. However, from a conservative moralist's viewpoint, to accuse the imagination power in the traditional Gothic conventions, as in "the Story-Haunted" is a means to maintain the established social order. Hence the decisive point is how Atwood in *Lady Oracle* transcends the moralistic level of the Gothic to keep the subversive power of the genre as she simultaneously parodies it in order to find an exit for women's anxiety for varying social expectations.

## 2.2 Parodies of the Gothic in Joan's Costume Gothic Style

Before answering problems about breaking the moralistic limitation, it is imperative to see how Atwood carries out her parody experiment on the Gothic from various angles in *Lady Oracle* to debunk the myth of the Gothic. Structurally speaking, the way in which the story is narrated by a Costume Gothic writer, Joan Foster, creates a framed narrative, which has long been customized in Gothic works, and makes *Lady Oracle* a story about storytelling. The structure of *Lady Oracle* thus displays the characteristic Gothic features of self-reflexivity as well as a postmodernist tendency. Moreover, the text interweaves stories of Joan's Costume Gothic and those of her own life, both of which are con-fused together at the end of the story. This con-fusion of reality and fiction serves as a base of Atwood's parody of the Gothic tradition. Hence the framework of *Lady Oracle* not only shows high self-reflexivity but also paves the way for its motif of the parody of Gothic conventions, which could be regarded as Atwood's first step to refashion the Gothic.

Frederic Jameson claims that parodies "ostentatiously deviate from a norm which then reasserts itself, in a not necessarily unfriendly way, by a systematic mimicry of their willful eccentricities" (16). As Jameson proposes, *Lady Oracle* assembles a dazzling collection of the Gothic conventions disguised in the Costume



Gothic that Joan writes and the dilemma she encounters in her real life.

Joan's Costume Gothic, *Stalked by Love*, can best exemplify Atwood's parody of the Gothic practices. First of all, *Stalked by Love* demonstrates typical Gothic settings, such as the maze in the Redmond Grange. The characteristics of the protagonist, Charlotte, are obviously a parody of the typical Gothic heroine:

Charlotte of course was an orphan. Her father had been the younger son of a noble house, disowned by his family for marrying her mother... Charlotte's parents had died in a smallpox epidemic... She was brought up by her uncle, her mother's brother, who was rich but a miser, and forced her to learn her present trade before he'd perished of yellow fever... She wished Redmond to know that she was not in his house, in his power, by choice but from necessity. Everyone had to eat. (30)<sup>23</sup>

Apart from her appearance,<sup>24</sup> Charlotte markedly resembles Jane Eyre, in Charlotte Brontë's novel of the same title, a typical female character in Modern Gothic—one that is chaste, brave, independent and intelligent but whose virtues confront threats from her male master. In fact, a stereotypical Gothic plot is revealed in *Stalked by Love*. For example, the heroine has to be in shabby clothes; then waits for her master's carriage to fetch her; afterwards, she will worry whether servants will sneer at her upon arriving at the Grange. The heroines are never portrayed as aristocrats because this is an image that middle-class women are unable to identify with. What they rely on to weave their adventures is a modest one who is going on an adventure to an unknown place.

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<sup>23</sup> See the edition published by Anchor Books in New York, 1998. All references to this novel appear in the text.

<sup>24</sup> The appearance of the heroines is another myth of the Gothic Atwood intends to undermine. The highly-resembling facial features of heroines in Joan's Costume Gothic are designed to be as vague as possible so as to let readers identify easily with the heroines. As Joan once says, "The heroines of my books were mere stand-ins: their features were never clearly defined, their faces were putty which each reader could reshape into her own, adding a little beauty" (32).

In addition to the conventional Gothic background, Joan's deliberation about the title of this story, with her hard-work to include key words, such as "Terror" and "Love" (30), into her titles is another example showing the formulaic nature of the Gothic fiction. Joan's statements, such as "if I could only get the clothes right, everything else would fall into line" (155), make readers sense that the space and time of the tale is constructed only to make it easy for readers to take an imaginary venture; thus there is no need to carry out any careful investigations of the real history.

Punter's description of historical romance identifies the genre as one with

... dominant love-plot, generally set in the past but with very little attempt at real historical distancing beyond, perhaps, occasional vocabulary and sometimes the interpolation of references to actual historical events....The same themes are repeated with only the slightest of variations and assumptions are frequently made which point to a readership already thoroughly familiar with a certain set of narrative and stylistic conventions (2).

Moreover, Joan gets used to sitting in front of the typewriter with her eyes closed, letting the plot just unroll itself (129). The way Joan produces Costume Gothic appears to be the most explicit exhibition of the formulaic fabrication of the Gothic narratives.

To parody the Gothic is not only to duplicate it but to deviate from it also. The departure from the customary Gothic versions is the most intriguing part in *Lady Oracle*. Joan's inability to follow the costumed rules of Gothic emplotment is one explicit illustration. In writing *Stalked by Love*, Joan swerves from the conventional viewpoint by siding with the villainess, Felicia. To switch the point of view from Charlotte, the heroine, to Felicia is a very subtle but significant transition. It starts from Joan's sympathy for her character, Felicia:

Sympathy for Felicia was out of the question, it was against the rules, it would

foul up the plot completely. I was experienced enough to know that. If she'd only been a mistress instead of a wife, her life could have been spared; as it was, she had to die. In my books all wives were eventually either mad or dead, or both. But what had she ever done to deserve it? How could I sacrifice her for the sake of Charlotte? I was getting tired of Charlotte, with her intact virtue and her tidy ways....Even her terrors were too pure, her faceless, murderers, her corridors, her mazes and forbidden doors. (319-20)

Through this switch of viewpoint, Atwood successfully undermines the stereotypes of Gothic characters and reverses the dichotomous representation of women in literature. She blurs the line between heroine and villainess by challenging inveterate prototypes of characters. This design not only mocks the deep-rooted practice of female virtue required in Gothic plots, but also induces readers to ponder the forces behind the construction of such a female image.

Concerning the production of characters, Rosemary Jackson considers that the creation of seemingly realistic characters actually involves ideological significance and purposes. She states:

'Character' is itself an ideological concept, produced in the name of 'realistic' representation of an actual, empirically verifiable reality outside the literary text...It[Realism] presents its practice as a neutral, innocent and natural one, erasing its own artifice and *construction* of the 'real.' 'Character' is one of the central pivots of this operation. (83)

Accordingly, to deconstruct typical characters in Gothic novels embodies the challenge to the ideology behind the practice. Before probing more deeply Atwood's criticism of the ideology behind the Gothic, it is crucial to examine her attitude towards the genre.

### 2.3 The Value of Reading the Gothic Style

Atwood's parody of the Gothic does not mean that she is disdainful of the genre. Instead she presents a dialectic conversation about the nature of the Gothic through Arthur's viewpoints and Joan's voice. In Arthur's opinion, Gothic romances are "worse than trash, for didn't they exploit the masses, corrupt by distracting, and perpetuate degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted?" (31) Arthur's statement ruthlessly pinpoints the most controversial part of the Gothic. Joan also recognizes those Gothic clichés which Arthur points out but she just cannot get away from the Gothic. She says, "They did and I knew it, but I couldn't stop"; hence she dares not tell Arthur that she earns her life by writing Costume Gothics (31). On the other hand, she tries to defend her point of view, too, and argues:

Life had been hard on them [female Gothic readers] and they had not fought back, they'd collapsed like soufflés in a high wind. Escape wasn't a luxury for them, it was necessary. They had to get it somehow. And when they were too tired to invent escapes of their own, mine were available for them at the corner drugstore, neatly packaged like the other pain killers... The truth was that I dealt in hope, I offered a vision of a better world, however, preposterous. Was that so terrible? (31-32)

Through Joan Foster's voice, Atwood reveals the subtle relationship between women readers and the Gothic genre. She contemplates the function of the Gothic fiction from a positive viewpoint as well, rather than simply negating the pleasure of reading Gothic stories. Besides, Joan points out that it is indiscreet to justify women's need for reading the Gothic romances in public. She does not try to explain the female need of escape to Arthur, for "that would have been treading on Arthur's most sensitive and sacred toe" (33). Atwood implies that the fantasy trip is mostly appreciated by women for by nature it is inaccessible and incompatible with the dichotomous thinking. In

terms of the binary logic, Gothic novels would either mislead women or conduct them. Arthur, who always follows this concept, believes that the Gothic “corrupts” women; hence for him, Gothic novels are things without any values. But for Joan, Gothic fantasy realizes that those impossible things come true in real life, offering an escape from reality. Fantasy trips thus work as a resting space for women.

Approximately two centuries prior to the publication of Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* is another remarkable parody of the Gothic convention. In this novel, Jane Austen, like Atwood, also attempts to rethink the influence of the genre from an objective position; both of them carry on a dialog with the Gothic conventions with high self reflexivity. *Northanger Abbey* is composed of a series of incidents encountered by the protagonist, Catherine Morland, who indulges herself in Gothic reading and fancies herself as some of the heroines of the Gothic. Even though she lived in the era of the Gothic boom, Jane Austen, with her acute observation and through her depiction of Catherine—a typical reader of the Gothic fiction, not only vividly depicts a middle-class female’s reading pattern in the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, but also accurately points out the influence that the Gothic fiction exerts on readers. Howells even claims that *Northanger Abbey* is “the most self consciously literary of all Jane Austen’s novels” (114).

In her book, *Strategies for Identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood*, Eleonora Rao compares *Lady Oracle* with Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. Rao first confirms the provocation of the parody in *Northanger Abbey*. For Rao, “while parodying the popular Gothic and sentimental texts of the time, *Northanger Abbey* offers a criticism of the genre, as well as an analysis of the form of the novel, and touches on the value of reading novels” (28). She then suggests *Lady Oracle* employs a similar strategy with *Northanger Abbey* on account of their reliance on parody for the purposes of

reflection. The crucial point, according to Rao, is that their attitudes are diverse—Austen is serious and critical of conventionalized Gothic formulae, while Atwood is humorous and tries to ponder the pleasure it offers. However, contrary to Rao’s argument, some critics highly appreciate the comic components in *Northanger Abbey*. For example, Howells claims, “She [Jane Austen] does so here in *Northanger Abbey* through comedy, with supreme literary tact trying to laugh readers out of their errors by showing what happens to her heroine when she indulges in too much Gothic fiction.” (116). Here the “errors” are committed by novelists. Howells contends that the goal Jane Austen keeps in mind is to criticize novelists for not using their imaginative talents to good purposes. In Howells’s opinion, *Northanger Abbey*, more than making parodies of the novels of the circulating library, discusses the way in which fiction is related to real life through imagination. Catherine Morland, like Joan Foster portrayed by Atwood, stands for those who “live with” the Gothic but act as if they “live within” it (Feng, 10). By expressing both satires as well as sympathies for Catherine’s imaginative response to life, “Jane Austen is exploring the imaginative propensities of the ordinary human mind, showing the extent to which imagination colours daily experience and judgement” (Howells, 115). What Jane Austen calls to the attention of Gothic readers is “a balanced awareness of the interplay between imagination and reason” (Howells, 130). Jane Austen’s stated awareness of her role as an omniscient author at the end explicitly implies “her delight in fiction making” as well as “her balanced awareness of precisely what kind of activity she is engaged in” (Howells, 115) Instead of condemning the fantastic elements in Gothic fiction, Jane Austen indicates “the irresponsibility of those writers who trivalise their important insights into human behaviour merely to frighten silly girls” (Howells 115).

Therefore, even though both *Northanger Abbey* and *Lady Oracle* delve into the relation between Gothic fantasy and real life to search for a balance, their authors

have different focal points. Jane Austen, according to Howells, attributes the fault to novelists' abuse of imagination, whereas Atwood, in my opinion, mediates between the desire of both readers and writers for Gothic fantasy. However, in view of the fabrication of Gothic fantasy, is Joan Foster's self defense for the value of the Gothic still persuasive? To see how Atwood treats the genre from a novelist's perspective, we shall observe her description of the protagonist of *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster, who is a Gothic reader as much as a writer.

#### 2.4 Parodies of the Gothic Conventions in Joan's Life

As discussed earlier, Becker suggests that Atwood tends to parody in a light voice. In *Lady Oracle*, the shared appreciation of the Gothic tradition between the author and readers produces a comic effect at the expense of the protagonist Joan Foster. An idealized Gothic heroine is always innocent but intelligent, and has the uncanny ability to find the exit from a maze. Yet, ironically, Joan is neither pure nor smart enough, not to mention her clumsy escapes. Joan believes that she could only be "one of the two stupid sisters... not the third, clever one" (151) or be one of "Cinderella's ugly sisters" (255). Joan's funny description of herself mocks conventional character prototypes and discloses that those "master plots," which define what an ideal woman is, are in fact nothing real but "mimetic realism" (Becker 187). As Becker proposes, "What all these intertexts share is the mockery of mimetic realism, and what their superimpositions in *Lady Oracle* effect is the refusal of any 'master'-plot, of any hierarchy of discourses" (186-87). The pertinent remark "mimetic realism" pierces to the core of the Gothic myth. All the problems Joan Foster and Gothic readers encounter are in consequence of failing to recognize this fact. Accordingly, how Atwood leads such a parodic Gothic protagonist to find the outlet from her maze and from patriarchal ideology is what I am most concerned with.



More specifically, the process by which Joan Foster—as a Gothic writer, reader and character—struggles from being mired in the myth of the Gothic to dispel this myth is crucial.

Like her misrecognition of the romance plots, Joan's obsession with advertisements is another embodiment of her misunderstanding of reality. When the underwear advertises itself "for lovers only" (27), Joan receives it without any doubt and buys it for when she goes with her lover, Royal Porcupine. She admits that "I was a sucker for ads, especially those that promised happiness" (27). Actually, at the very beginning of this novel, after arriving in Terremoto in Italy, Joan imagines herself enjoying a suntan "as a Mediterranean splendor, golden-brown, striding with laughing teeth into an aqua sea" (4) but immediately we see how she only gets burned since she has not applied any suntan lotion. Meanwhile, sitting on the balcony, she immediately falls into another fantasy, believing that if she can stand on the right balcony long enough at the right time, "something would happen: music would sound..." (4). Nevertheless, the real situation is that the balcony where she is standing now is only five feet off the ground and there is no hearing of any magical music. All these fantasies, which can be easily seen in advertisements or movies, are standard formulas of happiness produced by capitalism. Without the wisdom to see through the mechanism, Joan makes her life look ridiculous and comic.

Instead of looking things from social and economic viewpoints, Freud interprets fantasy as an articulation of lack. For Freud, fantasies, like nocturnal dreams, are an imagined scene representing the fulfillment of a wish which belongs to unsatisfied persons. Freud first associates fantasies with children's play since it is too difficult for human nature to give up on the pleasure of imagination, so "the growing child, when



he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects;<sup>25</sup> instead of *playing*, he now *phantasises*” (145). Freud then suggests, “We may lay it down that a happy person never fantasizes, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of fantasies are unsatisfied wishes and every fantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality” (146). In other words, adults employ the pleasure of fantasy as a substitute for the realization of their wishes. Joan creates a castle in the air to experience the happiness of being a fairy-tale princess, a fantasy that cannot possibly come true.

Moreover, Joan’s fantasy not only implies her lack but contextualizes contemporary women’s anxiety of the conflict between the perfect feminine image as represented in the Gothic Romance, and the various social roles they need to play in reality. What makes Joan as well as romance readers more uneasy is that they cannot get rid of the pleasure from fantasizing, namely, reading and writing Gothic romances. While connecting the writing with daydreams, Freud specifically limits the writing within the genres of “romances and short stories, who [which] nevertheless have the widest and most eager circle of readers of both sexes.” (149). Plots of fantasy are hardly a portrayal of reality; typical characters in Gothic romances are even particularly regardless of the variety of human characters in real life. However, departure from reality is not what concerns readers most. They actually tend to ignore it. What matters is that the fantasy in romances provides a similar pleasure resembling play activities in childhood which people are ashamed to repeat when they are adults. According to Freud, the creative imagination that novelists display in the Gothic are not irresponsible, as Howells claims; on the contrary it enables readers to enjoy their own pleasure originating from childhood play without self-reproach or shame. As

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<sup>25</sup> “To link his [the child’s] imagined objects and situations to the tangible and visible things of the real world...is all that differentiates the child’s ‘play’ from ‘phantasying’ (Freud 144).

Freud indicates, “when a creative writer presents his plays to us or tells us what we are inclined to take to be his personal day-dreams, we experience a great pleasure, and one which probably arises from the confluence of many sources” (153).

What sources conspire to produce Joan Foster’s fantasy give a hint on contemporary women’s dilemma. Joan, being a representative of Gothic readers, gets accustomed to equating life with fiction. She is apt to cast real people into her Costume Gothics. She does not draw clear lines between reality and her Gothic fantasies. For example, after she meets Arthur, she “immediately” gives him “a part in *Escape from Love* as a benevolent old eccentric who rescues Samantha Dean in Hyde Park...”(166). *Lady Oracle* is basically Joan’s narration back and forth between reality and fantasy in her mind. Her fantasy of her lovers particularly belongs to the style of the Gothic Romance. She compares both Arthur and Royal Porcupine with Byron whose biography she has just skimmed through. She regards herself as the Polish Count’s lost love whilst the truth is that Paul charges her rent after she starts to make money. Furthermore, when she finds Paul has a revolver, she first associates it with Mavis Quilp’s nurse novels by Paul, suspecting that perhaps Paul is “a secret agent” with the “message in code” disguised as the Quilp books (153); subsequently Joan imagines that she is “Eva Braun in the bunker” (157) and worries about how to deal with Paul and how to get out.<sup>26</sup> Her real life is transformed by her imagination into a Gothic fiction centering on how a protagonist can escape from the maze.

To some degree, Joan’s three loves are representatives of different mirrors for Joan to see herself. Paul, like Joan, is weaving daydreams as a realization of desires and believing in his fantasized world. After hearing his story that he is the last of a

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<sup>26</sup> “Eva Braun in the bunker” refers to Eva Anna Paula Braun, Adolf Hitler’s mistress. In early April of 1945, Braun came to Berlin to be with Hitler at the Führerbunker (leader’s shelter). Later while the Red Army closed in, Braun refused to leave. Finally they committed suicide together in the bunker. Hitler shot himself with a revolver; Braun took a cyanide capsule. For Eva Braun’s brief biography, see <<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/braun.html>>

dying race, Joan describes him as “a liar as compulsive and romantic as myself” (146). Paul’s imagination actually deviates more from reality than that of Joan, since he not only writes romantic nurse novels but even romanticizes the war:

He thought there would be another war, in fact, he hoped there would be; not that he thought it would solve or improve anything, but so that he himself might fight in it and distinguish himself by acts of bravery....But he didn’t picture war as tanks, missiles and bombs, he pictured it as himself on horseback, with saber, charging against impossible odds. (157-58)

Paul’s fancy is exactly another fragment of historical romance which treats historical background as a convenient media for daydreaming. Therefore it is predictable that Paul’s incapability to separating fantasy from reality will ultimately influence his real life. With the logic that mistresses are supposed to be “unfaithful by nature” (158), he surmises Joan must have betrayed him. The Polish Count, like Joan Foster, is a parodic Gothic character. The fact that Paul is by no means any of the heroes he identifies himself with, but an ordinary employee in a bank, again illustrates the gap between reality and Gothic fantasy.

Arthur, being Joan’s husband rather than lover, represents another mirror for Joan. In her mind, her husband is a faultless figure conforming to patriarchal ideology at first. If Paul demonstrates the absurdity of fantasy, Arthur then exposes the suffocation of reality. Joan depicts Arthur as a “prisoner of conscience” (210). The problem with Arthur is that he insists on ultimate moral justice and he wants everyone to be as morally correct as he is. Being like Arthur at first is the goal for Joan, since she has always wished to be a “normal” woman and conform to social expectations. She says, “For years I wanted to turn into what Arthur thought I was, or what he thought I should be” (210). But later, she discovers Arthur’s enthusiasm has a cycle. Whenever he finds out not everyone carries the same goodwill as he himself does,

Arthur then becomes deeply depressed. Joan hence concludes that Arthur is not much different from herself, thinking “there were as many of Arthur as there were of me. The difference was that I was simultaneous whereas Arthur was a sequence” (211). Joan senses that actually both Arthur and she have more than one self. The difference is that she keeps multiple identities simultaneously to maintain the balance between reality and fantasy, whereas Arthur acts with a “manic-depressive psychosis,” either being keen to fulfill his dream or being discouraged at his failure. Arthur’s breathless conscience is the embodiment of the dichotomous patriarchal thinking— people are either honorable or dishonorable. What he has faith in is something too perfect to be realized and yet Arthur is totally unaware of this fact; however, Joan once scolded Arthur, saying:

You don’t live in the real world, you won’t join any kind of a political party and go out there and really change things, instead you sit around and argue and attack each other.... All you’re interested in is defining your own purity by excluding everyone else. (260)

Accordingly, reality is a concept hard to catch and it is Arthur, not Joan, who lives unquestioningly in illusions built on patriarchal ideology all the time since Joan has at least experienced various struggles between reality and fantasy. Actually, Joan is an accomplice in Arthur’s misrecognition of reality. While Gothic novels present a mimetic realism for women readers, Joan “invent[s] a mother” (37) who conforms to the model from Arthur’s point of view. Hence, Joan’s lie indirectly keeps Arthur’s fantasy intact. In other words, the world men construct and live in could also be viewed as an artificial one that women help to maintain.

Owing to Arthur’s pressing conscience, the Royal Porcupine becomes Joan’s fantasy through which she can escape from reality without the help of her Costume Gothics. The Royal Porcupine, a contrast to Arthur, lives in and with various fantasies,

such as his exhibition of con-crete poems, his obsession with cultural detritus, and his affair with three mistresses. In consequence of equating fantasy with reality, he is anything but reasonable. He once tells Joan that “If I was reasonable, you wouldn’t love me. Everyone else is reasonable” (264). It is little wonder Joan leaves him after the disappearance of the magic, when the Royal Porcupine becomes less and less like the Royal Porcupine but more and more like Chuck Brewer who wishes to live “a normal life” (269). It is not until her fantasy for the Royal Porcupine collapses that Joan gradually realizes love is just a “tool for accomplishing certain ends” (283) and a “pursuit of shadow” (283). She starts to question the love between her and her lovers as she comprehends what Paul wants from her. “He[Paul] probably didn’t want me at all, he wanted the adventure of kidnapping me from what he imagined to be a den of fanged and dangerous Communists....I was not the same as my phantom” (283). Joan’s contemplation of love initiates her disenchantment from romantic love as exemplified in Gothic romances.

In fact, prior to Joan’s gradual waking up to reality, Atwood has demystified the illusions woven by the Gothic Romances in Joan’s life. The wedding scene is one of the most ironic examples. In this scene, the union of the hero, Arthur, and the heroine, Joan, is supposed to be a happy ending like those in a conventional Gothic Romance. It is, however, a Gothic “gone wrong.” First, it is still in doubt whether this is a marriage of Arthur with Elizabeth Delacourt or with Joan Foster. Knowing nothing about Joan’s identity problem, Arthur still believes he knows all about Joan’s secrets and thinks that through the marriage they will become better acquainted and can save rent at the same time. Here we see that Atwood is suggesting there is uncertainty even in reality.

Taking a further step, she increases the suspense within the plot by adding Gothic ingredients. While waiting for the wedding day, Arthur loses weight to be like

“a funeral brass” (198), whereas Joan cannot help but keep on eating and gaining weight. The most Gothic and comic moment takes place on the very wedding day. Joan, wearing a cheap cotton dress she bought at “Eaton’s Budget Floor,” finds that where they head for the wedding ceremony is “Braeside Park,” the place where she spent her obese adolescence. She starts to fear that Arthur will discover her deception in which her obesity is the worst part. She seriously considers whether or not to faint like a Gothic heroine. What scares Joan more is that the ceremonies will be conducted by Leda Sproutt—the spiritualist that Joan’s aunt used to visit in the Jordan Chapel. The wedding, interrupted by the “caterpillar story” and an unhappy woman’s phantom, is too nightmarish to be real (203). As a result, scrutinizing their snapshot, Joan depicts them thus: “our [Arthur’s and her] faces were a sickly blur and the sofa was brownish-red, like dried blood” (203). What Joan experiences and remembers from the wedding is not happiness but terror.

Susanne Becker’s comments on this wedding scene succinctly points out how Gothic conventions are installed and undercut:

Gothic tone is effectively displaced into what would conventionally be a romantic scene; it works to enhance the dark side of the event and the fears of the heroine at what should be the ‘happy ending’ of her love story....The wedding scene is a good example of how Atwood’s reverential parody displays complicity with the Gothic conventions it repeats and incorporates, but is also a critique of their ideological problem. (175-76)

As Becker suggests, Atwood makes use of Joan’s wedding artfully to shatter the illusion of romantic love in popular Gothic Romances, which conspires to guide women to conform to certain fixed gender roles accorded with patriarchy ideology. Becker calls this process “lion-taming”—the influence a cruel but tender hero exerts to domesticate heroines in Gothic fiction (190). Becker’s theory of “lion-taming”

corresponds to the efforts Joan makes in order to achieve Arthur's expectation of a good woman. Joan's grotesque wedding thus implies the terror of this "lion-taming" gender construction. After they get married, the horror does not disappear but is displaced by another plot—the plot about being murdered by husbands.

The typical plot concerning the murder by husbands of their wives is another Gothic variation Atwood presents in *Lady Oracle*. There are two episodes related to matrimonial crime: one is Joan's suspicion that her father killed her mother; the other is Joan's conjecture that her husband plans to murder her. The former is further evidence showing Joan's overly indulgence in Gothic imagination—an issue we discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Joan visualizes all the details about how her father sneaked out of the hospital and went back home to kill her mother but made it look like an accident. She tries to persuade herself, in vain, to get rid of this idea but starts her detective search instead. Not surprisingly, the real cause of her mother's death is left unexamined and everything is still under suspicion, just like conventional Gothic plots. The interesting part is that not only does Gothic fantasy influence Joan's real life but her real life intrudes into the Costume Gothic she is writing.

For a while after my mother's death I couldn't write. The old plots no longer interested me, and a new one wouldn't do. I did try—I started a novel called *Storm over Castleford*—but the hero played billiards all the time and the heroine sat on the edge of her bed, alone at night, doing nothing. That was probably the closest to social realism I ever came. (180)

Joan's self-sarcasm humorously blurs the gap between reality and fiction. Her hypothesis that her husband is going to murder her goes beyond the boundary problem and involves subjectivity issues. It is when Joan has more and more difficulty dealing with her various identities that she presumes Arthur plots to kill her because he has found out about her other selves.



Arthur, who conforms to the social expectations so precisely, has always been a criterion for Joan to measure her own behavior. At the beginning, Joan tries hard to match the right image in Arthur's eye but she can only pretend to be so as a result. Having failed to reach the goal, Joan feels frustrated and gets used to attributing faults to herself. Things do not become better even after she plans to start a new life in Italy. Images of an ideal woman follow her like her shadow. Having escaped to Terremoto, she still feels sorrowful about herself:

I never learned to cry with style, silently, the pearl-shaped tears rolling down my cheeks from wide luminous eyes, as on the covers of True Love comics, leaving no smears or streaks....If you could cry silently people felt sorry for you. As it was I snorted, my eyes turned the color and shape of cooked tomatoes, my nose ran, I clenched my fists, I moaned, I was embarrassing, finally I was amusing, a figure of fun. (6)

In Joan's mind, it seems that everything is simply "mismatched" (11) for her. But how could all girls weep gracefully all the time like heroines in Gothic romances?

Stein depicts Joan as "a woman who delights in spinning stories but finds herself caught in the plots she fabricates" (42). All her problems derive from her tendency to cast real people into certain roles belonging to the genre, which is exactly also the peril of the Gothic thinking that Margaret Atwood alludes to in Karla Hammond's interview. Atwood comments, "certainly many of her (Joan's) complicated problems are caused, not by her victimhood or her survivorhood, but by her romantic myth we're all handed as women in a non-romantic world" (107). In the interview with J.R. (Tim) Struthers, Atwood once more remarks on issues about the myth of Gothic thinking:

I think in an anti-Gothic what you're doing is examining the perils of Gothic thinking, as it were. And one of the perils of Gothic thinking is that Gothic



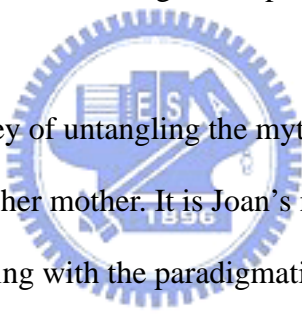
thinking means that you have a scenario in your head which involves certain roles—the dark, experienced man, who is possibly evil and possibly good, the rescuer, the mad wife, and so on—and that as you go to real life, you tend to cast real people in these roles as Joan does. Then when you find out that the real people don't fit these two-dimensional roles, you can either discard the roles and try to deal with the real person or discard the real person (64).

Atwood's last comment points out Joan's dilemma. To discard the imagined world or the real one perplexes Joan, since the imagined world is too perfect to be realized, while the real world might be too grotesque to be accepted. In other words, Joan wonders whether she should learn to be a modest woman like traditional heroines in the Gothic, or to acknowledge her various selves.

In this chapter, through the close examination of Joan's Costume Gothic and her real life, we can see how Atwood successfully refashions the Gothic conventions. At first, those formulaic plots and stereotyped characters in Joan's Costume Gothic as well as the way she composes them clearly show the cliché of the Gothic conventions. The fact that Joan, as a Gothic writer, is unable to follow these accustomed rules when writing her last Costume Gothic further parodies these Gothic conventions. In addition, the fact that Joan, as a Gothic reader, has difficulty in differentiating the Gothic fantasy and reality not only vividly illustrates the influence of the Gothic fantasy upon readers, but also induces readers to think the fabrication nature of the Gothic novels and how women readers are influenced by it. Atwood's parody of the Gothic thus preserves the self-reflected nature of the genre while she presents the issues about the model feminine image molded by Gothic fantasy. Succinctly speaking, when Atwood attempts to ponder how this genre influences its female readers, she leads these readers to confront the conflict between the manifold faces of themselves and the fixed image prescribed for them.

### Chapter Three: Rethinking Womanhood

In this chapter, I intend to investigate the process how Joan, as an exemplary Gothic reader, dispels the Gothic myth with the understanding that the idealized love and women presented in Gothic novels are not reality but a fantasy of patriarchal ideology. I attempt to study this topic from two aspects. First, I will analyze Joan's ambivalence toward her body and then examine the change of her writing style of her Gothic works which embodies her growth from being trapped in the Gothic myth to being reborn from it. Furthermore, Joan's recognition of her multiple selves will also be my focus in this chapter. Finally, to conclude my thesis, I will discuss how Joan's fabricated identities function as a parody of the manipulated reality in Gothic novels, and how the mobility of multiple selves might be a possible way out of the norm prescribed for women.



To investigate her journey of untangling the myth, I will begin with the relationship between Joan and her mother. It is Joan's mother who tries to mold her daughter into a woman according with the paradigmatic heroine image. Her first step towards the image-building on her daughter is to name her after Joan Crawford, a movie star famous for her slender figure. Faced with her mother's expectations, Joan cannot help but wonder, "Did she give me someone else's name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own?" (38). It is ironic that Joan Crawford, whose real name is Lucille LeSueur, does not have her own name either. Naming issues testify to the fact that images are fabricated. Names are manipulated to build images; neither names nor images equal to one's real self. So what it will be like when Joan's mother pursues such an empty image?

Joan describes her relationship with her mother as a "professionalized" one: "She [Joan's mother] was to be the manager, the creator, the agent; I was to be the product" (63). The metaphor illustrates how women, like a product, have always been

shaped by the patriarchal thinking; and ironically the one who implements the ideological reproduction is also a woman, in particular the mother. While examining the relations between Joan and her mother, Rosowski also defines Joan's mother "as a cultural agent who transmits social mythology" (199) and makes Joan suffer from the gulf between "mythic ideal" and "human reality" (198). The disparity between the myth ideal and human reality is actually the recurring motif in Joan's life, waiting for her to stride across, among which the contrast between the perfect image of a slender body and Joan's obesity apparently is the most serious one.

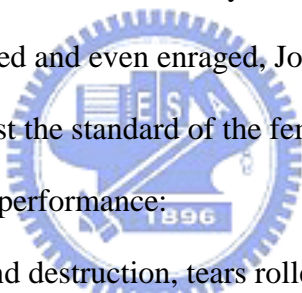
In addition to naming her, Joan's mother has Joan attend dancing classes, wishing her daughter to lose weight and become a slender girl. The last thing she looks forward to seeing is Joan's difference from the norm which seems to indicate she is a failed mother. However, as a fat daughter, Joan neither fits the image of Joan Crawford nor does she become a graceful dancer. Unwilling to accept the reality, Joan's mother does whatever she can to help Joan lose weight—visiting a psychiatrist, taking laxatives, and offering Joan money to buy clothes—to cope with the contradiction shown in her body.

### **3.1 Female Bodies**

But Joan hates the paradigmatic perfect image of women. Joan's body, as a result, becomes the battlefield where she resists her mother's concept of conforming to a feminine norm. Unacknowledged by the gender role according to dominant patriarchal thinking, Joan longs for the recognition from her mother as well. Rather than losing weight, the tactic she adopts is to gain weight so as to defy her mother's image-building project. She eats avariciously to declare the war between her mother and her. As Joan recalls, "By this time I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could eat. The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the

disputed territory was my body” (65-66). Obesity successfully makes Joan visible and endows her with the power to force her mother to look at her. Her every movement and action in the house becomes “a sort of fashion show in reverse, it was a display” (67). Not content with her achievement, she also puts on the most noticeable clothes, those “offensive hideousness, violently colored, horizontally striped” (83) she can find, to enrage her mother and ultimately make her cry. Experiencing “the joy of self righteous recrimination” (84), Joan claims triumphantly, “I had defeated her: I wouldn’t ever let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful” (84).

In fact Joan’s violent protest against her mother’s value system can be traced back to her traumatic childhood memory of dancing classes. In one of the recitals, she is forced to play a mothball rather than a butterfly, simply owing to her obesity. Feeling disappointed, humiliated and even enraged, Joan has not realized that she is punished for her offense against the standard of the female body. She inflicts her resentment on the stage in her performance:



It was a dance of rage and destruction, tears rolled down my cheeks behind the fur, the butterflies would die.... “That isn’t me,” I kept saying to myself, “they’re making me do it”; yet even though I was concealed in the teddy-bear suit, which flopped about me and made me sweat, I felt naked and exposed, as if this ridiculous dance was the truth about me and everyone could see it. (46)

The mothball penalization seems to remind Joan that by being a woman, one can either be a norm or a monster. Joan is so eager to clarify that she, a fat girl, should not be humiliated and forced to become a mothball; she can dance as gracefully as those butterflies. It is “they” who make her do it. This traumatic memory remains with her, making her not only “wary of any group composed entirely of women, especially women in uniforms” (83) but also oppose her mother’s efforts to transform her into a norm. When others attempt to confine her through her body, she risks her own body as

a revenge tool.

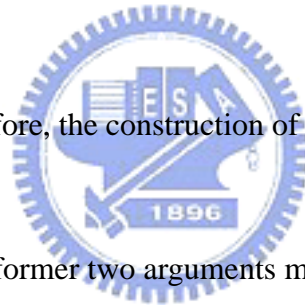
Feminist criticism has long linked the women's sphere with their bodies. Anorexia nervosa (bulimia) in particular has been a major feminist issue. Gilbert and Gubar state that "the prominence of anorexia nervosa as a female dis-ease and a theme in women's literature suggests the women's representation of food often reflects guilt and conflict about their bodies, appetites, and desires" (390). According to this observation, Joan's eating disorder is an act of resistance embodying an ambivalence toward her mother who implements the patriarchal values. On one hand, she resents her mother for trying to transform her into a norm, but on the other hand, she desires her mother's recognition as well. Furthermore, it is not only Joan's mother but Joan herself who feels uncomfortable with her fleshy body also. Trying on her butterfly costume for dancing, Joan finds herself "grotesque," "obscene," and "indecent" in the short pink dancing skirt, with her waist, arms and legs exposed. She describes herself "monstrous," comparing herself with the tragic heroines in *Little Mermaid* and *The Red Shoes* (215-16). The figure of "the fat lady," which haunts her throughout her life, is thus born from the uneasiness about her "abnormal" body. No matter where she goes, or escapes, she considers herself the one different from the norm, being unable to get rid of the image of "the Fat Lady." Joan's plump body distinguishes and separates her from the others; she therefore loses the ability to fulfill the 'appropriate plots' designed for her by her mother and the patriarchal ideology.

Issues about female body as the motif of *Lady Oracle* imply the fear of contemporary women. Women nowadays do not merely have to deal with the conventional domestic roles but are required to keep their figures fit as well. The stereotypical image of female beauty is imposed upon women through various channels in modern society. To some degree, women are obliged to perform this "duty" since if they fail to do so, what they receive from others will not be sympathy

but laughter, like what Joan has experienced when playing a mothball on the stage. The infliction of this kind of prescribed beauty can be understood as a process of gender construction. As a little girl, Joan used to observe attentively how her mother applied makeup, attempting to figure out the correct formulas of being a woman. Women are not born as “a woman” but are led to learn to be one. Gender does not have any biological nature but a process of construction.

In her book, *Technology of Gender*, Teresa de Lauretis presents four propositions to anatomize “gender” as a cultural concept:

- (1) Gender is a representation....
- (2) The representation of gender is its construction....
- (3) The construction of gender goes on as busily today as it did in earlier times, say the Victorian era....
- (4) Paradoxically, therefore, the construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction. (3)



Among these four points, the former two arguments make an illuminating footnote to Joan’s primary memory about cosmetics. To learn how to be a woman is to learn how to reproduce the paradigmatic image already set for women. “Although a child does have a biological sex, it isn’t until it becomes (i.e., until it is signified as) a boy or a girl that it acquires a gender...”. De Lauretis continues on her observation about the construction of gender, “Gender is not sex, a state of nature, but the representation of each individual in terms of a particular social relation which pre-exists the individual” (5).

Moreover, this representation of gender is actually the process of its construction. To restate this more accurately, being a woman can be realized as the process of being constructed as a woman. De Lauretis succinctly concludes that “[t]he construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation” (5). In

*Lady Oracle*, the problem Joan Foster is obliged to face is exactly this process of construction. If the destination of the construction is too far to achieve, the process will never end. Joan discovers that some of the makeup tools even cause pain to her mother: “instead of making her [Joan’s mother] happier, these sessions appear to make her sadder, as if she saw behind or within the mirror some fleeting image she [is] unable to capture or duplicate”(62-63). Pursuing an inaccessible female image, Joan’s mother undergoes a painful process of gender construction the result of which seems destined to be distressing. In Joan’s dream, her mother, in front of her vanity table with three mirrors, has three actual heads rather than just reflections. In Joan’s eyes, her mother, who has tried exhaustedly to duplicate the paradigmatic female image is transformed into “a monster” (63) haunting Joan thereafter. The only one prescribed scenario leading to happiness terrifies Joan; the last thing she wants to see is herself looking like her mother. Nevertheless, the conventional happiness, as in those Costume Gothics plots, fascinates her as well; the dream she longs for is to accomplish the task her mother fails to complete. What she has not realized is that her fear and dream are actually the same thing— while struggling to free herself from the prescribed gender scenario, she is also longing for the happiness the scenario promises.

### **3.2 The Norm Prescribed for Women**

In fact, to some extent, Joan’s mother goes through a phase of bewilderment and anxiety about subjectivity similar to that experienced by Joan. In addition to playing her domestic roles, she searches for her position by taking one or two jobs, but none of them lasts long (63). Prior to becoming a good wife and mother, she has once engaged with someone else. Analogous to Joan’s fleeing from home, she offends her parents and also runs away from home at the age of sixteen, and later works as a



waitress. With these fragments of information pieced together, it seems that Joan's mother, before endeavoring to be a "normal" woman, struggles to stick to her own self, which nevertheless results in a situation too difficult for her to handle. Feeling frustrated, she turns to do her utmost to fit into the role assigned by the patriarchal society. She starts with her appearance. Joan describes her mother thus: "Her hands were delicate and long-fingered, with red nails, her hair carefully arranged" (85). She allows no deviance from the paradigm. Her decoration of the living room also explicitly demonstrates her desperation to be "normal"; as Joan describes it, "My mother didn't want her living rooms to be different from everyone else's, or even much better. She wanted them to be acceptable, the same as everybody else's" (66). With the same motive, she makes her daughter become a member of the Brownies where all "were supposed to try to be the same" (50). Besides, in order to keep everything perfect, she is even unwilling to hold her daughter's hands so as to keep her gloves clean. She is living in, as Joan concludes, "this plastic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit" (129).

The conflict further comes from the former desire to affirm her individuality since it has not disappeared but keeps on irritating her continuously. Consequently, while pretending to read a book about child psychology, she is actually reading "*The Fox*, a historical novel about the Borgias" (66).<sup>27</sup> Gothic novels offer her a temporary exit from the suffocating demand of being a paradigm according to patriarchal values. The upset of Joan's mother represents the age-long problem—whether women have to return to the domestic territory ultimately after their journey of searching themselves, as those Gothic heroines have gone through. Do women have to repress themselves in

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<sup>27</sup> The Borgias are historical figures— a Spanish royal family in the Renaissance. They are thought to be the "history's first criminal family," and the forerunner to the Italian Mafia. There are many accusations against the Borgia family, including incest, adultery, murder and scandal (see <http://royalwomen.tripod.com/id30.html>). Stories about the Borgias are a common motif in popular films and fiction. For the list of related works, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borgias>.

order to live up to the social expectations?

Pursuing the happiness of social myth, Joan's mother succumbs to the patriarchal ideology but finds it depressing. On account of the resembling struggle that both Joan's mother and Joan experience, Joan's success in defying her mother is not a true victory over the patriarchy ideology; on the contrary, it marks her loss. Her obesity even makes herself hate her own body and find it grotesque and horrible, as well as longing for love from her mother or recognition from others:

On my side, much as I would have welcomed the chance to embarrass her, strangers were different, they saw my obesity as an unfortunate handicap, like a hump or a club foot, rather than refutation, the victory it was, and watching myself reflected in their eyes shook my confidence. It was only in relation to my mother that I derived a morose pleasure; in relation to everyone else, including my father, it made me miserable. (70)

Joan confesses that she eats not only to defy her mother but "from panic" as well (74). Obviously, obesity is neither the way to a happy ending nor an alternative exit from the restriction of dominant ideology.

Contrasting with Joan's and her mother's vexation, Aunt Lou (Louisa K. Delacourt) seems to be exempted from all those tensions. While Joan's mother is reluctant to touch Joan, Aunt Lou allows Joan to rest her forehead on her neck when they are chatting. For a long time, Joan regards Aunt Lou as her mother. Aunt Lou is tall and heavy, like Joan, but opposite to the figure of Joan's mother, and is conflicting with patriarchal expectations. Nor does the standard of her partner conform to the norm. Her husband is said to be a handsome gambler but has left her; yet afterward she has a lover, Robert. The most paradoxical part is her philosophy— "You can't always choose your life, but you can learn to accept" (84). Neither taking violent protests like Joan nor catering to social expectations, Aunt Lou seems to be

comfortable with her life style and appearance but her refusal to visit the fattest woman/ Fat Lady of the Freak Show in Canadian National Exhibition discloses her ambivalent feeling of herself. Perhaps owing to such regret, she makes a will to help Joan out of her predicament: she leaves Joan two thousand dollars but whether Joan can get it or not is contingent upon whether she can lose one hundred pounds.

Aunt Lou's legacy is actually not obedience to the dominant gender construction but an opportunity for Joan to be emancipated from her obesity which is based on hate and revenge to defying against her mother. However, there is risk attached to this liberty. Is Joan able to preserve her true self after converting herself into the norm in terms of the dominant gender expectations? Faced with the problem directly, she is now obliged to cope with more complicated situations. For instance, after she successfully loses weight, she cannot ignore the male gaze on the street any more: "Strange men, whose gaze had previously slid over and around me as though I wasn't there, began to look at me from truck-cab windows and construction sites; a speculative look, like a dog eyeing a fire hydrant" (119). Once Joan endeavors to become a "normal" woman, she will find that "being normal" creates new problems which will not solve the problems of her relationship with her mother, either..

It is the slender Joan, not the fat Joan, that her mother is incapable of tolerating. Joan comments: "While I grew thinner, she herself became distraught and uncertain" (119). She doesn't even want to see Joan, telling her that "the sight of you makes me sick" (119). Joan's struggle and change probably remind her of her analogous past; her contradictory reaction to her daughter's transformation could thus imply her uncertainty of her belief in the patriarchal ideology. However, Joan does not understand what leads to her mother's rage at that moment. Instead of feeling delighted by her mother's distress, she gets confused and would rather see her being pleased. At last, her mother collapses; she tries to kill Joan, sticking the paring knife

into Joan's arm, as a result of which Joan flees from home.

### 3.3 Multiple Selves in *Lady Oracle*

Issues about the prescribed norm for females bring us back to the Gothic theme about escape. Taking readerly participation into consideration, David Punter reexamines the relation between reality and the imagined world in the Gothic to redefine the term "escape." He considers how, when the character's grasp on reality is doubtful, readers are then forced to figure out reality by themselves; hence the Gothic is "not an escape from the real but a deconstruction and dismemberment of it, which we as readers can only put together by referring its materials to our own assumptions about the relations between world and mind and by entering actively into the self-conscious play of the text" (97). Joan, a Gothic character as well as a reader who tends to equalize reality with Gothic fantasy, now confronts reality directly. How is she going to figure out the nature of reality and find the way out of the maze built on patriarchal ideology? Furthermore, how are we as readers of Joan's tale going to distinguish Joan's imagination from the facts, so as to see Gothic fantasy's attachment to reality?

Fleeing from her mother, Joan, no longer with any incentive to defeat her mother, is eager to be a normal woman, stating "I didn't want anything too different or startling, I just wanted to fit in without being known" (138). She is glad to have sex with the Polish Count because it proves that she is "normal" (149). Ironically, bending to get rid of her mother, Joan's new life turns out to be a duplication of her mother's. Thus she is destined to undergo the ambivalence of the gender construction that her mother once experienced. She realizes the gender construction stipulates a mold of femininity that is too difficult for her to achieve. But even if it is pathetic to obey the gender regulations, its recognition is still what Joan longs for. The Fat Lady forced to

walk on the high wire in her dream forces her to reflect on her own situation:

How destructive to me were the attitudes of society, forcing me into a mold of femininity that I could never fit, stuffing me into those ridiculous pink tights....

How much better for me if I'd been accepted for what I was and had learned to accept myself, too. Very true, very right, very pious. But it's still not so simple.

I wanted those things, that fluffy skirt, that glittering tiara. I liked them. (99)

Joan, like the Fat Lady walking with caution on the high wire, sacrifices herself to fit into the model of feminine image simply because of the temptation of the happiness that patriarchy promises. While she does her best to conform to others' expectations, her life then becomes a test of this promise.

During her exploration of the regulations of dominate ideology, the first rule she perceives is the logic of dichotomy. For example, after Arthur's roommates discover Joan has cleaned their kitchen, they no longer regard her as "politico of sorts" with respect, but tease her as a woman instead. From a male point of view, it is impossible for a woman to look after both domestic and public sides. A woman can be either an aggressive intellectual or a modest wife but never both. Joan thus concludes, "One could not, apparently, be both a respected female savant and a scullery maid" (169). And it is apparent that men prefer a vulnerable woman to an intelligent one. Arthur has always enjoyed Joan's failure; as Joan says "He wanted me to be inept and vulnerable" (88). Longing for Arthur's acknowledgement, Joan therefore performs her clumsiness to please Arthur. As a result, Joan's failure grows into a show with Arthur as the audience.

However, obviously the world is never as simple as the dichotomous thinking demonstrates. While yearning for the recognition of dominant ideology, Joan wishes to be fat again after experiencing various sexual harassments, because at least by being fat, she need not worry about being molested. She thus has to develop fear of

men artificially when she is a slender woman. Relearning how to arm herself, Joan misses her shelter—obesity which is “an insulation,” “a cocoon,” and a “disguise” (139). Moreover, surrounded by dichotomous thinking, she is unable to make up her mind about which role she should choose: a domestic one or a public one. Her favorite movie, *The Red Shoes*, which focuses on a ballet dancer torn between her career and her husband, parodies an analogy to her dilemma. She also associates it with Andersen’s fairy tale, the *Little Mermaid*. Both of them feature a heroine with a desire to be recognized by dancing in public, which is a mistake, as Joan realizes belatedly, and results in their failure to please the heroes.

In order to dance and be loved simultaneously, Joan decides to be a lovable woman in public and to “dance” in private. Her fabricated identities are her tricks. Joan gives herself different names, a method corresponding to her mother’s naming strategy, so as to be Arthur’s wife and a Costume Gothic writer at the same time. With Arthur, she is Joan Foster, a wife fitting social expectations, while in front of readers, she uses Aunt Lou’s name to publish her Costume Gothic novels. Joan’s fabricated identities thus form a parody to the manipulation of the reality in the Gothic novels. Both “reality” in the Gothic novels and that in her real life are made up. Afterwards, Joan is even asked by Arthur’s friends in *Resurgence* to use a fake identity to implement the dynamite plan of blowing up Peace Bridge as a gesture. Turning their trick against the gang, Joan makes up stories for them since they never figure out how to carry it out but only stay cautiously at the level of theory. Ironically, Joan’s fake death eventually gets her friend into jail. Deceits are treated as truth; the line between reality and imagination has never been clearly distinguished. Nevertheless, those made-up identities do not free Joan from the ideological constraints but make reality more difficult to deal with. Getting lost in the maze built on her various fake names, she fearfully realizes what others like about her is her disguised self, since she always

pretends to be someone else to meet their expectations of her.

It is noteworthy here that the lesson Joan needs to learn now is not how to draw a line between Gothic fantasy and reality. Instead, she knows it, as she once sates, “I kept Arthur in our apartment and the strangers [imagined heroes] in their castle and mansions, where they belonged” (215). Besides, she has always tried to “keep [her] two names and identities as separate as possible” (30). In fact, it is the coexistence of two identities—Joan Foster and Louisa K. Delacourt —that maintains the balance of Joan’s married life:

As long as I could spend a certain amount of time each week as Louisa, I was all right, I was patient and forbearing, warm, a sympathetic listener. But if I was cut off, if I couldn’t work at my current Costume Gothic, I would become mean and irritable, drink too much and start to cry. (212)

She realizes that she needs both of them, reality and fantasy. But this kind of separation cannot satisfy her. Though her double identities maintain the balance of her life, she cannot help but feel that “neither of them was completely real” (216). Joan confesses:

The difficulty was that I found each of my lives perfect normal and appropriate, but only at the time. When I was with Arthur, the Royal Porcupine seemed liked a daydream from one of my less credible romances....But when I was with the Royal Porcupine, he seemed plausible and solid. Everything he did and said made sense in his own terms, whereas it was Arthur who became unreal; he faded to an insubstantial ghost, a washed-out photo on some mantelpiece I’d long ago abandoned. (259)

The balance coming from the division of fantasy and reality is not what she pursues. The problem she encounters now is not how to distinguish reality and fantasy but how to define who she really is among her various fabricated identities. She wants to bring



her fragmented life together and be acknowledged as a complete and true self. She does not want others to like a disguised Joan; nor does she wish to lead an artificial life. Joan falls into a contradictory complex of her multiple selves. On one hand, she longs for the right timing to tell Arthur her story, but on the other hand she makes her utmost efforts to protect her secrets. At this point, Atwood transcends the traditional moral issues about overindulgence in Gothic fantasy and successfully puts emphasis on the topics of female subjectivity in this parodic Gothic of *Lady Oracle*.

### 3.4 The Recognition of the Nature of Reality

The turning point happens when Joan uses her real name to publish *Lady Oracle*, a Gothic gone wrong. Prior to *Lady Oracle*, Joan had secretly published a great number of Costume Gothics under her aunt's name. These Gothic romances, though they give her some pleasure, fail to guarantee her integrity. She longs to be acknowledged as the true Joan Foster by the public but simultaneously fears it. One day, as she came to a dead end in her Costume Gothic, *Love, My Ransom*, Joan decides to "simulate" the scene that she is working on. This is her first attempt at automatic writing which symbolizes her consciousness of the formulaic nature of conventional Gothic novels. Joan used to produce her Costume Gothics mechanically. Following the Gothic conventions, she closes her eyes and let the formulaic plot unroll itself. This kind of mechanic production always works until Joan is writing *Love, My Ransom*, when the Gothic formulae cannot satisfy her any more. Thus, she simulates the scene of her Gothic romance by trying automatic writing. To her surprise, she composes instead several feminist poems. These poems born from automatic writing are a creation of spontaneity, different from her former mechanic reproduction of the fixed paradigmatic Gothic tales.

The automation writing draws forth those that are innermost in Joan's

mind—her confusion, anxiety, and fears of the patriarchal ideology. Through the process of automatic writing, Joan escapes from the frame of her conscious thought and has chance to explore her unconscious world. In other words, while trying automatic writing, Joan gets out of the rational patriarchal discourse but enters an unknown space where she encounters her thoughts and emotions that have been repressed by patriarchy before. Hence, the automatic writing is a significant step in Joan's artistic as well as personal "awakening."

In Joan's eyes, her poems look like her Costume Gothics, but this time it is "a Gothic gone wrong. It was upside down somehow... [because] there was no happy ending, no true love" (232). The female figure in one of her poems is no longer a pure Gothic heroine but one whose tears are "the death you fear" (221). Joan's feminist poems that reverse the conventional Gothic elements are actually the metamorphosis of her former Costume Gothic. However, she has not yet sensed the analogy between her Gothic works and her real life at this moment. She will not get the point until she works on her last Costume Gothic, *Stalked by Love*, which I will discuss in the next section.

Later, she published her poems, *Lady Oracle*, under her own name and received an encouraging review which she knows clearly is fabricated by her editors who make sure that they have sent the book to someone would like it. Yet, a disaster – and what worries her most – is followed by her exposure of her true self. It is too difficult for others, not to mention her husband, Arthur, to believe in her talent and her automatic writing. Instead of pulling her selves together after publishing *Lady Oracle* under her real name, Joan finds it harder and harder to grab reality, feeling the author of *Lady Oracle* is not herself. She confesses how she feels threatened by what is happening around her and to her, "It was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I'd never said but which appeared in the

newspapers,...my dark twin...She wanted to kill me and take my place” (250). While endeavoring to unite her fragmented selves, she ends up being haunted by her multiple selves, including the names of Aunt Lou, the ghost of her mother and in particular the image of the Fat Lady.

After she becomes a public figure following the success of *Lady Oracle*, the Fat Lady, who used to walk across the tightrope in her dreams, loses her balance and falls “in a slow motion, turning over and over on the way down” (250). The Fat Lady in Joan’s dream embodies Joan’s fear in her real life. The Fat Lady’s endeavor to keep her balance on the tightrope parallels Joan’s wary arrangement of her multiple selves in order to live up to the social expectations. However, now while she reveals one of her selves to the public, the Fat Lady falls in her dream. Her falling in a slow motion vividly depicts Joan’s panic of losing her balance which has always been tottering.

Later, Joan leaves the Royal Porcupine. While she prepares to tell the truth about her self to Arthur, wishing him to bring her back to safety, this time she cannot help but see the Fat Lady skating gracefully with the thinnest man in the world on the ice. The Fat Lady intrudes into Joan’s real life now. Yet, as the thin man lifts the Fat Lady and throws her, the Fat Lady is floated up and hung in suspense. Her secret that, although she is large, she is actually very light is disclosed. “They had to keep her [the Fat Lady] tethered to her bed or she’d drift away, all night she strained at the ropes....

They were going to shoot her down in cold blood, explode her, despite the fact that she had now burst into song” (274). At this time, the floating Fat Lady, who cannot reach the solid ground, symbolizes Joan fears that there will be no hope for her to go back to the social order. Worse still, she is terrified that this social order might be going to destroy her. While Joan ventures to build her own subjectivity, the predicament of the Fat Lady which embodies Joan’s fear, is more and more alarming.

Subsequently, while receiving anonymous telephone calls and notes, the Polish

Count reaches Joan and makes Joan again fantasize about him as her “lost love” and “rescuer” (280). But at this moment she knows well that this kind of fantasy provides no comfort and help; her life has evolved into a situation beyond her control. There is no hope of being rescued by her “heroes”—Paul, Arthur, Chuck Brewer. Where is the outlet for this Gothic “reality”? The visit of Fraser Buchanan makes the situation even worse. His inquiry about Joan intensifies her terror of the exposure of her multiple identities. At first, with her multiple identities, Joan fears that no one knows her true self; yet at last what frightens her is that someone might have found out about her true identity. Her multiple selves at this moment become a confinement from which she struggles to free herself. Escaping from her self-made entrapment ironically makes Joan a literal Gothic heroine on the run.

As she attempts to organize the riddle of her chaotic life, Joan suddenly suspects it is Arthur who is behind all of the mysterious notes and telephone calls and is trying to destroy her. The success of bringing her genuine self to the public only results in the need for her to execute this public self. And to plot her own death again renders her the playwright as well as the persecuted heroine once more. Joan unwittingly transforms her life into a Gothic tale which is set in Italy this time. Intending to create a new self in Italy after her fake death, Joan, with a new name, is eager to discard her former selves. She decides to cut off her too noticeable “waist-length red hair” (10); afterward she burns it over the gas burners and dyes her hair. Then she buries her clothes, feeling as if she is getting rid of “the corpse” (16) of someone she has killed. Nevertheless, this kind of ritual does not succeed in expelling those ghosts of her selves; her former selves, like her past, are still haunting her, making her life more gothic:

Below me, in the foundations of the house, I could hear the clothes I'd buried there growing themselves a body. It was almost completed; it was digging itself

out, like a huge blind mole, slowly and painfully shambling up the hill to the balcony...a creature composed of all the flesh that used to be mine and which must have gone somewhere. (321)

All her dreadful former selves have flesh and blood, going to devour their creator—Joan Foster. What is worse is that Joan is considered a witch by local people after they discover she had burned her clothes, cut her hair, and appeared with a new name. Joan wonders, “If I got a black dress and long black stockings, then would they like me?” (337). However, in reality, even with the right clothes things will not just become all right like the person in her costume gothic.

Not knowing what else she can do, Joan decides to run away again, but fails because someone has drained the tank of her car, which renders her life an even more ridiculous version of Gothic plots about blackmail and kidnapping. She pictures how she will be tortured: “would they keep me in a cage and fatten me up as was done among primitive tribes in Africa, but with huge plates of pasta, would they make me wear black satin underwear...would I become one of those Fellini whores, gigantic and shapeless?” (329). Having come this far, Joan’s fantasy is becoming more and more absurd. And with her death under the investigation, there is no way back to her life before. What else can she rely on when her fantasy is no longer sufficiently convincing to comfort her? What if people find the truth of her fake death? What will happen if she comes to admit that the Gothic plots she depends on is only mimetic realism?

Regardless of all these unsolvable problems from the past, Joan tries to concentrate on her Costume Gothic so as to make a living like before. However, while working on *Stalked by Love* she has difficulty reaching the pre-supposed ending. She gets tired of the heroine, Charlotte, and feels sympathetic towards the villainess, Felicia. As discussed in the second chapter, this is Joan’s start to parody the

conventional Gothic. She cannot simply believe those formulaic Gothic characters and plots any more. This time in her dream the Fat Lady rises into the air and then descends on her. Joan is absorbed into the Fat Lady. The past haunts her, and drives her to face the unsolved conflict between the model feminine image and her true self. She has transformed into her character Felicia, who has not drowned but has returned to Redmond, calling Redmond by the name of Arthur and begging for his love. Her separation of reality and fantasy no longer works now. Her Costume Gothic and her real life overlap and mingle together.

Parallel to Joan's situation, both Charlotte and Felicia, who represent different aspects of Joan, go inside the maze. Charlotte, a standard female model, goes into the maze even although Joan warns her worriedly. Her journey inside the maze proceeds well but soon she regrets this, since she is now anxious to go out but is caught by Felicia. Charlotte's adventure corresponds precisely to Joan's pursuit for the norm in the patriarchal maze and Joan's uncertainty followed. The plot in which Charlotte encounters Felicia is a parallelism with Joan's fabricated identity meeting her true self. In *Stalked by Love*, Charlotte is rescued in time, as in the conventional Gothic plot. Yet, Joan is unable to be contented with such an outcome; hence she makes Felicia, who stands for Joan's inner self, go into the maze as well. Contrary to Charlotte's happy ending, Felicia encounters four women who grotesquely embody Joan's fears originating in the past and which have haunted Joan throughout her life:

The third was middle-aged, dressed in a strange garment that ended halfway up her calves, with a ratty piece of fur around her neck. The last one was enormously fat. She was wearing a pair of pink tights and a short pink skirt covered with spangles. From her head sprouted two antennae, like a butterfly's, and a pair of obviously false wings was pinned to her back. (341).

Aunt Lou's impact and the humiliation of performing as a mothball come to life. Joan

cannot escape from these problems all her life. The only way out of the maze is the door that Redmond guards. The door symbolizes the juncture between patriarchal ideology and the desired freedom. Resisting the temptation of Redmond's embrace, namely the happiness patriarchy promises, Felicia/Joan realizes the true nature of the Redmond/ Arthur/ patriarchy. Redmond "was a killer in disguise, he wanted to murder her as he had murdered his other wives....He wanted to replace her with the other one, the next one, thin and flawless" (343)

While Redmond is about to kill Felicia, in the meantime, Joan hears footsteps outside the door of her Italian residence. Joan chooses not to escape and instead opens the door, staying where she is and facing reality. She is aware that she has spent too much of her life "crouching behind closed doors, listening to the voice on the other side" (341). Mustering up her courage, she turns the handle easily and overcomes the man outside. Shocked by her own strength, Joan says, "I certainly didn't think I would knock him out like that; I suppose it's a case of not knowing your own strength" (344). Feeling sorry about what she has done, she takes care of that man and determines to go back to Canada to face the problem of her multiple selves. There is no specific ending of *Lady Oracle*, yet instead of escaping, Joan no longer merely believes in the formulaic Gothic romances but has power to resist them. It takes Joan a long time, struggling to come to this moment of enlightenment.

The first step of her awakening occurs when she listens to her mother's anger rather than habitually identifying with Aunt Lou's escapism. Throughout Joan's life, the depression of her mother is embodied in various forms to deliver messages to Joan, who nevertheless is never capable of deciphering them. The first time happens when Leda tells her that her mother's astral body stands unhappily behind her in Jordan Chapel. The second message comes when Joan sees her mother, who weeps even more desperately than before, in London. Meanwhile Joan does not know that her



mother has died; it is when she receives her father's telegram that she speculates whether her mother has something to tell her. But at that time, Joan is unable to realize her mother's tears and still dreams of her mother as "three-headed," "menacing and cold" (213). Later, as her mother's ghost appears at her wedding, Joan, feeling sympathy for her, starts to contemplate why her mother, who has devoted her whole life to building a "happy" family, receives no appreciation.

Ultimately, when she has no way out of her dilemma in Italy for the first time, Joan listens to her mother cautiously and tries to understand her:

She was dressed in her trim navy-blue suit with the tight waist and shoulder pads, and her white hat and gloves. Her face made up, she'd drawn a bigger mouth around her mouth with lipstick, but the shape of her mouth showed through. She was crying soundlessly, she pressed her face against the glass like a child, mascara ran from her eyes in black tears. (329)

Gradually, Joan comes to realize that what has caused her mother's tragedy is the conflict between the patriarchal confinement and feminine subjectivity. She then reinterprets the meaning of her name: "Maybe my mother didn't name me after Joan Crawford after all, I thought; she just told me that to cover up. She named me after Joan of Arc..." (337). Faced with the mission of breaking the myth of patriarchy, which her mother has expected her to accomplish, Joan again wants to escape on the impulse:

Didn't she know what happened to women like that? They were accused of witchcraft, they were roped to the stake, they gave a lovely light; a star is a blob of burning gas. But I was a coward, I'd rather not win and not burn, I'd rather sit in the grandstand eating my bag of popcorn and watch along with everyone else. (337)

At this moment, Joan experiences the pain of seeing through the patriarchal fantasy,

and yet is afraid of possessing the power of insight.<sup>28</sup> She thinks it will be easier to be an innocent woman who simply believes in the fantastic world that Gothic romances create.

Despite the fact that Leda Spratt tells her about her power, Joan always tries to evade it and keeps on asking herself: “I wasn’t sure I really wanted great powers. What if something went wrong? What if I failed, enormously and publicly?... It was easier not to try” (108). Unfortunately, her fear does come true: she creates a Lady a woman of dark power in her book, *Lady Oracle*— “She was enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power” (221) At that time, she refuses to admit her power, either, and continues to say “I wasn’t at all like that [Lady Oracle], I was happy. Happy and inept.” (221). Resisting her mission, she pretend to be dead in order to flee from all troubles. It is after a long journey that she has the courage to open the door; and at last she can bravely face Arthur who for a long time has been the measure for her behavior. Now she says “He [Arthur] loves me under false pretense, so I shouldn’t feel too rejected when he stops” (345).

### 3.5 The Mobility of Multiple Selves

To make a comprehensive survey of Joan’s journey into subjectivity, we should go back to her writings since they closely parallel her progress. In the beginning, her writing of Costume Gothics illustrates her dependence on a dichotomous fantasy world in stereotyped Gothic novels to evade the complicated reality. Meanwhile, she can only use various identities to match up conflicting roles set by society. In this phase, both of her Costume Gothics and her real life are Atwood’s parody of Gothic conventions. Afterwards, while trying to integrate her multiple selves, she composes a

<sup>28</sup> Related perspectives see Karen F Stein’s *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, 61-62 and Hsiu-chuan Lee’s “Screen, Maze, and the Female Dissimulation: Consuming Gothic Romance in Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*” 113.

feminist poem, *Lady Oracle*, to present a Gothic world in reverse of the conventional world. In this series of short verses, Joan creates a female figure, Lady Oracle, who is contrary to the stereotyped Gothic heroine that she has been familiar with. In one verse, the tears of Lady Oracle disclose women's melancholy when she is "bent down / under the power" (221). Joan does not realize yet what this "power" is but the other figure in the poem tells us it might be the control from a male. Joan says, "This man was evil, I felt, but it was hard to tell.... He had many disguises" (221). Furthermore, in another poem, Lady Oracle reveals the figure of a woman of power and manifold faces:

She sits on the iron throne

She is one and three

The dark lady                      the redgold lady

The blank lady                      oracle

of blood, she who must be

obeyed                                      forever (225).



Here Lady Oracle does not yield herself to the masculine power but sits on the throne, becoming the one who must be obeyed. The crucial part is that she is "one and three." She is not a flat character from Gothic romances but one with multiple faces. Such a feminine image with plural faces reveals Joan's discontent with the one-sidedness of paradigmatic Gothic heroines. Hence, it is not surprising that when working on her Gothic romance later, Joan says she is tired of the heroine's virtue and she even narrates the tale from the villainess's viewpoint (319-20). Therefore, this manifold-faceted Lady Oracle could be regarded as the prelude to Joan's parodic work in her last Costume Gothic.

Little by little, Joan senses the contradictory nature of the conviction of patriarchy after she escapes to Italy because of the success of *Lady Oracle*. She

recognizes the disguise of the confinement from patriarchal ideology in her last Gothic Romance, *Stalked by Love*, as discussed in the former section. Rather than passively receiving the Gothic fantasy, Joan's courage and transformation symbolize the possibilities for women not to be constrained by the dominant patriarchal discourses. Her journey into female subjectivity thus provides a parodic vision of the fixed plot and characters in the Gothic. Most important of all, it is not until Joan's recognition of the fabricated nature of these conventions that the mobility of her multiple selves truly stands for a resistance power against the fixed feminine image prescribed by patriarchy. Prior to the awakening, her various identities are merely busy making corresponding responses to different social expectations that are conflicting with one another.

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan tries various methods to mend the disparity between reality and the Gothic fantasy so as to be a "normal" woman in terms of patriarchy discourse. Multiple selves are, at first, the measures she adopts to maintain simplicity and the dichotomous order with which the conventional Gothic novels always end. Nevertheless, as one "living in the real world but does it as though the other is the real one" (Oates 75), Joan's misunderstanding of the essence of reality leads her to being haunted by her own multiple selves in grotesque forms. Only after she sees through the Gothic myth and accepts the multiple-dimension of reality can she avoid being fixed and constrained by the gender construction of the Gothic conventions. In other words, with the recognition of the affectation of Gothic fantasies, Joan's life pattern based on multiple selves and escapes has finally turned into a point of resistance against the ideal feminine image and formulaic plots in Gothic fiction.

Such an ending also indicates that through a postmodernist reading, readers are encouraged to understand and reject the fantasy Gothic Romance produces formulaically. It can be understood that the Gothic romances that feature the ideal

heterosexual family, the ideal female image, and romantic love are an apparatus that society uses to consolidate the gender construction based upon the patriarchal ideology. Atwood's parody of the Gothic conventions challenges or even subverts this perfect "mimetic realism" of Gothic fiction. Nowadays, the crucial problem is not only about how to distinguish fantasy and reality as depicted in "the Story-Haunted" but also about how to face fantasy and reality.

It needs to be emphasized that Joan's multiple selves not only evoke a response to dominant patriarchal discourse featuring reason and simplicity but, more important, construct a new philosophy featuring inclusion rather than exclusion. Instead of celebrating a temporary suspense of the patriarchal law like that in the carnival, Joan's multiple selves, which involve the disintegration of unity, exist outside of the law. Eleonora Rao suggests that Atwood's texts partake of a logic of "both/and" rather than "either/or" (xviii). Joan's acceptance of multiple selves embodies this logic. With the example that Joan, besides being Joan Foster, needs to be Louisa K. Delacourt as well, Rao proposes that Joan needs both reality and fantasy. She argues, "Joan's stories represent for her a way of enjoying, in close conjunction, both fantasy and reality, something which Arthur could not possibly have accepted. For Joan it is not an *either/or*: it is an *and*" (93). What Rao tries to advance here is that Joan's multiple selves represent an inclusion of contradictory concepts such as reality and fantasy, which Joan needs both to maintain the balance of her life. On one hand, Joan works on her Gothic fantasy as Louisa K. Delacourt but on the other hand, in her real life, she tries to be an ideal wife according to social expectations. Only when she can play both roles well does Joan feel a sense of security. Hence, in terms of Joan's multiple selves, reality and fantasy do not exclude each other but work as complementary elements.

With the courage to open the door to confront reality, Joan ultimately comes to

comprehend that she relies on not only the Gothic fantasy but also on the real life, which explains why she is unable to live only with either the Royal Porcupine or Arthur. Compared with Joan, there is no reality in Royal Porcupine's life because for him "reality and fantasy were the same thing" (270) while there is no fantasy for Arthur, who completely denies it, considering the Gothic Romance as "trash of the lowest order" (31).<sup>29</sup> Only Joan, once caught in the web interwoven by fantasy and reality, relies on both and realizes both. Her journey to search for female subjectivity blurs the boundary between reality and fantasy. In addition to breaking the dichotomous concept, the logic of "both/and" further corresponds to the feminine refusal to be defined. Therefore, the mobility of Joan's multiple selves not only criticizes the formulaic Gothic conventions but also provide the way out of the confinement of patriarchal ideology. This mobility is a transformed escapism which indicates a self-conscious exploration of alternate space and forms. It means a release from cultural constraints rather than just simply running away. By recognizing the true significance of her multiple selves, Joan is able to go beyond the norm that her mother and society have been trying to impose on her and starts a new life with autonomous agency.

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<sup>29</sup> In fact Arthur has fantasy too, though he totally denies it. Joan, while in Italy alone, recalls that "he liked living out of suitcases. It must've made him feel like a political refugee, which was probably one of his fantasies, though he never said so" (20).

## Chapter Four: Conclusion

In *Lady Oracle* Atwood parodies the Gothic conventions to call into question the Gothic genre and the ideology it implies. In the first chapter, the historical review of the Gothic shows that the genre itself possesses several unique characteristics. Although the prime of the Gothic novels only lasts around half of a century, from Walpole's *Otranto* (1764) to Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), the Gothic genre has built a solid set of conventions which was widely employed thereafter. Furthermore, because of the excess of the conventional Gothic elements, the Gothic becomes a target of many parodies, such as Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, by which the Gothic presents its nature of self-consciousness. Both writers and critics explore it to discuss issues about imagination, escapes and female subjectivities. There is no exception in *Lady Oracle*; the crucial point is how Atwood not only rewrites the Gothic, but transcends its conventions as well to question the gender construction behind it. Through a postmodernist reading, the nature of self-reflexivity is clearly revealed in Atwood's parodic Gothic and it is also the self-reflexivity that endows Joan's multiple selves with the power to free herself from the confinement of patriarchy.

The nature of self-reflexivity is one of the problematics that I have worked on in my thesis. Critical interpretations of *Lady Oracle* have stressed Atwood's parodic treatment of the Gothic genre through which the self-consciousness of the artificiality in the Gothic has been widely discussed. What critics pay little attention to is the significance of this particular sense of self-consciousness for Joan's multiple selves. Most of them tend to define Joan's multiple selves as either an escape from patriarchy or a strategy against patriarchal rule. My reading, however, emphasizes how self-reflexivity bestows new meanings to Joan's multiple selves and thereby empowers her. To examine *Lady Oracle* by analyzing what parody means to Joan as a



Gothic reader provides a more comprehensive perspective on Atwood's parody of the Gothic.

Atwood explores the Gothic from the viewpoints of both Gothic writers and Gothic readers. From this aspect, there are two layers of Atwood's parody of the Gothic—the parody of Joan's Gothic works and that of her real life. In reality, Joan is a Gothic reader who indulges and believes in Gothic fantasy. As a result, she tends to cast real people in stereotyped Gothic characters. Her dependence on the Gothic fantasy causes her many troubles and comically makes her a Gothic heroine on the run. Such a comedic vision becomes one important part of Atwood's parody of fixed feminine images in the Gothic conventions.

On the other hand, Joan's problems about her relationship with her mother and her various identities will not be solved until she rethinks and rewrites her own Gothic tales. As a Gothic writer, Joan goes through three phases of Gothic creation. At first, she uses her aunt's name to publish *Costume Gothics*, which are filled with the clichés of the Gothic genre. This is the most obvious part of Atwood's parody of the Gothic conventions. Then, when Joan has difficulty in reaching a pre-supposed ending to one of her *Costume Gothic* novels, she tries the automatic writing and creates the feminist *Lady Oracle*. This series of verses that inverts the Gothic elements is a metamorphosis of Joan's former conventional Gothic romances, and the three-faceted goddess in the poem further symbolizes female anger under the confinement of gender construction. This second phase of Joan's writing indicates Joan's gradual awakening from the constraint of patriarchy, and foreshadows her parodic reconstruction of her own Gothic novels. At last, after Joan fakes her death and listens to her mother's anger, she works on her last *Costume Gothic* novel, *Stalked by Love*. In this novel, not only the Gothic conventions are reversed but the boundary between fantasy and reality blurs. Two female protagonists in *Stalked by Love* enter the maze and confront all Joan's

fears. *Stalked by Love* is Atwood's parody as well as Joan's. Joan releases herself from the Gothic conventions by parodying her own Gothic romances and her self-reflecting parody endows meanings on her multiple selves.

With her realization of the nature of fabrication in the Gothic, Joan comprehends the mechanics of gender construction in patriarchal thinking. Her multiple selves, therefore, stand for a refusal of the fixed feminine role prescribed by patriarchy, and represents the mobility that enables Joan to accommodate all possibilities, including contradictions between reality and fantasy. Now Joan, herself, is the Lady Oracle with multiple faces who has the power to embrace her own future. Hence, in *Lady Oracle*, Atwood parodies Joan's life/ reality and her Gothic writing/fantasy to undermine the seemingly realistic conventions of the Gothic from within. Through the parody of the genre, she successfully examines how gender is constructed in the genre, and how these constructions may be challenged and changed.



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