

Reflecting on the writer's identity and on canadian literature in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*

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Resumen

Este trabajo analiza las reflexiones de la escritora canadiense Margaret Atwood en relación a los conceptos de la identidad y subjetividad en la literatura canadiense a través de su novela *Lady Oracle* (1976). Al enfocar el desarrollo artístico de su protagonista en la narrativa, la novela de Atwood cuestiona la percepción de la identidad canadiense y cuestiona a la literatura canadiense como doble o con copia.

Abstract

This paper purports to analyze how Canadian writer Margaret Atwood reflects on issues related to Canadian literature and subjectivity in her novel *Lady Oracle* (1976). Focusing on the protagonist's artistic development throughout the narrative, Atwood's novel questions the perception of Canadian identity as splitting and also contests the definition of Canadian literature as double and copy.

"The Canadian Authors Meet"

Shall we go round the mulberry bush, or
shall
We gather at the river, or shall we
Appoint a Poet Laureate this fall
Or shall we have another cup of tea?

O Canada, O Canada, Oh can
A day go by without new authors
springing
To paint the native maple, and to plan
More way to set the selfsame welking
ringing?

(F. R Scott,
17-24)

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976)², a narrative centered on protagonist Joan Foster, is also a reflection of the writing process. As character Joan ponders upon her own artistic development, that is, how she becomes a novelist and poet, Atwood's novel foregrounds an analysis of the complexity of the writer's self-representation. When Atwood creates a protagonist who contributes to Canadian cultural production, *Lady Oracle* also discusses how Canadian literature reflects on Canada's cultural identity. I intend to show that Atwood's novel challenges the view of Canadian literature perceived as a copy of European, especially British, literary tradition. Furthermore, this paper also attempts to show that, because the protagonist is a Canadian writer who experiences some difficulties to define who she really is, *Lady Oracle* also brings into question the discussion of the Canadian writer's identity.

The discussion of the protagonist's identity shows that the subjectivity is very complex. The novel firstly problematizes subjectivity by questioning the view of identity as double, a recurrent image in the novel. After Joan flees to Italy to escape some personal problems in the city of Toronto, in Canada, the protagonist assumes another identity and confesses: "This is the beginning or my double life. But hadn't my life always been double?" Reflecting back on her life through flashbacks, the protagonist also realizes that "[there was always the shadowy twin, thin when [she] was fat, fat when [she] was thin"³. The twin emphasizes Joan's splitting personality between the obese child and adolescent of her past and the slim woman she becomes. Besides, Joan hides her past experience from her friends and her husband. She is often scared of this past coming to surface. Her fear of the past and of the other identity "reinforces Joan's self-division and highlights her duplicity, thus helping to create the character's double voice"⁴. In other words, Joan's doubles and split personalities in this first moment question the view of human self as a unity and demonstrate that the psyche can reveal more than it apparently shows. In the case of Joan's subjectivity, her identity is even more multifaceted than the image of the double. She only understands the complexity of who she really is through her writing experience.

Challenging Self-representation

Joan's double has also a significant relation with the protagonist's writing process: it represents Joan's artistic identity. When Joan begins to compose her gothic novels in England, she adopts a pseudonym, her dead aunt's name, Louisa K. Delacourt. Because of her fragmented personality, divided between her self as housewife Joan and writer Louisa K. Delacourt, Joan feels as though she "was two people at once with two sets of identification paper"⁵. She refers to this artistic identity as "someone with [her] name... out there in the real word... [her] dark twin, [her] funhouse-mirror reflection" and, further, the protagonist even becomes afraid of this other self when she describes it as

² Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, Anchor, New York, 1976.

³ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 245.

⁴ Eleonora Rao, "Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*: Writing against Notions of Unity", pp. 136.

⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 121.

“taller... more beautiful, more threatening”⁶. As the examples illustrate, her artistic identity is personified in a way that it becomes a physical presence in the novel.

Nevertheless, writer Joan is not only divided between her own self and the artistic identity of Louisa Delacourt. Throughout the novel, Joan's fragmentation is also represented in the women's figures she depicts in her book of poems, *Lady Oracle*, and her Gothic novels. In these works, the heroines undergo events similar to Joan's personal experience. For example, some of these women escape from reality and have love affair with dangerous men, just like Joan does. Besides, these heroines often resemble Joan's physical appearance because of their beauty, red long hair and green eyes. Susan MacLean states that the characters of Joan's Costume Gothics are projections of the protagonist⁷.

The protagonist's book *Lady Oracle* is an example in which one of Joan's female characters functions as her projection. This book of poems is created when Joan sits in front of a three-sided mirror, lights a candle, and feels as though she is in a trance, while words appear on the piece of paper. These words are intended to a mysterious woman, the Lady Oracle. The similarities between Joan and this mysterious Lady Oracle begin, first of all, with the use of a mirror, which is a sign of self-identification. Another similarity between the two women lays is the fact that this poem shows the upcoming events in Joan's life. The character Lady Oracle “floats down the river” while, in a similar way, Joan sails on Lake Ontario when she attempts to forge her death to escape Toronto.

Joan's last book, *Stalked by Love*, written in Italy, also parallels her own life, making the protagonist similar to the Gothic heroine who she creates. The writer imagines the climax of this novel, while, at the same time, she attempts to run away from a man. Joan believes that this stalker is her husband Arthur. Likewise, in Joan's fiction, the antagonist of *Stalked by Love*, Felicia Redmond, also attempts to escape from her husband in a maze. When Felicia finally reaches the center of the maze, she encounters four other women who all claim to be Mrs. Redmond. As a matter of fact, these women are representations of the multiple personalities which Joan assumes throughout the novel: an overweigh woman stands for adolescent Joan, an old lady is her aunt Louisa and also Joan's writer's personality, and other two women who resemble adult Joan represent Joan's double lives: the Lady Oracle and the ordinary housewife. Even Joan's Gothic villain/hero, Mr. Redmond, is transformed into Joan's husband.

If on the one hand Atwood's narrative show that Felicia, the Lady Oracle and the other Gothic characters create a parallel to Joan's subjectivity and actions, on the other, the novel points out that Joan's texts are not simply projections of the protagonist's own life. Joan insists that her book “isn't about anyone... It's all sort of, well imaginary”⁸ and even her character Lady Oracle

⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 250.

⁷ Susan MacLean, “*Lady Oracle*: The Art of Reality and the Reality of Art”, pp. 191.

⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 235.

has no relation with her because, for Joan, she “wasn’t at all like that”⁹. The similarities between Joan and her protagonists in contrast to her denial of the autobiographic tone of her books create a paradox. This paradox that emphasizes and, conversely, undercuts the autobiographic tone of Joan’s texts seems to question the duality resulting from artistic creation. According to Stonehill, by referring back to the artist, literary works that reflect on the writing process create a paradoxal twinning of narrative illusion and disillusion¹⁰. The difficulty to distinguish Joan’s subjectivity from her artistic identity and her protagonists contests essentialist distinctions between the writer’s self and her artistic identity, and between life and fiction. Through this paradox, Joan’s writing process breaks with the boundaries between what is considered reality and what can be seen as illusion.

The problematization of this distinction between Joan’s personal experience and fiction parallels Margaret Atwood’s own critique of duplicity in literary creation. In *Negotiating with the Dead: a Writer on Writing*, Atwood claims that “the mere act of writing splits the self into two”¹¹. Therefore, all writers carry the “Jekyll hand”, the “Hyde hand”—a reference to double identities in the famous literary piece, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Nevertheless, Atwood claims that writers carry slippery identities, emphasizing the complexity of artistic identity. Reflecting on the fusion between art and life, Atwood uses the analogy of Alice’s looking glass:

She goes *through* the mirror ... Instead of destroying her double, the “real” Alice merges with the other Alice—the imagined Alice, the dream Alice, the Alice who exists nowhere ... The act of writing takes place at the moment when Alice passes through the mirror. At this one instant the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves and Alice is neither here nor there, neither art nor life.¹²

Atwood’s reflections show that when authors write, they not only represent an imaginary self, but also appropriate this imaginary self to their own personality, creating, therefore, several possibilities of representing their selves in the mirror of literature. In the novel, as I have illustrated, Joan’s subjectivity is mixed with her artistic identity and her Gothic heroines. Since the writers’ artistic identities are mixed with their own identities, it becomes problematic to define one separated from the other just like Alice’s real self in the mirror cannot be separated from her illusionary or artistic identities.

Furthermore, the novel points out another problem when one attempts to distinguish Joan’s life from her fiction. Joan’s supposedly “reality” is as much of a construct as is her fiction. Confessing the reasons why she forges her own death and new life in Italy, Joan says that she fabricates her life because the truth is not convincing¹³. According to Linda Hutcheon, our common-sense presuppositions about “the real” (not to mention our common sense about our

⁹ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 221.

¹⁰ Brian Stonehill, *The Self-conscious Novel: Artifice in Fiction from Joyce to Pynchon*, Pennsylvania UP, Philadelphia, 1988, pp. 161.

¹¹ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: a Writer on Writing*. Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 32.

¹² Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: a Writer on Writing*, pp. 56-57.

¹³ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 148.

own identities) “depends upon how that ‘real’ is described . . . There is nothing natural about the real” because “everything [is] always ‘cultural’, in this sense, that is, always mediated by representations”¹⁴. Hence, *Lady Oracle* illustrates that our perception of reality and identity are also fabrications, contesting again a simplistic distinction between the real and the imaginary.

Canadian Identity and Literature

If in an analysis of the writer's subjectivity it is significant to challenge the duplicity of the writing process, defining Canadian writer's identity is even more problematic because of the fragmented and splitting images, which abound in Canadian culture. In this sense, the presence of fragmented and splitting images in the construction of the Joan's subjectivity in *Lady Oracle* seems to be reference to the discussion of the complexity of Canada's identity.

To understand the way Atwood's novel problematizes the notion of duplicity of Canadian cultural identity and art, it is significant to investigate why double images are often recurrent in the perception of identity and nationhood in Canada. Linda Hutcheon claims that: “Obsessed still with articulating its identity, Canada often speaks with a doubled voice”¹⁵. This doubled voice seems to echo a dichotomous ideology, that is to say, the traditional definition of Canadian as divided. This definition is rooted in the formation of Canada's cultural identity and in the strong attachment to the past. Hutcheon, for instance, argues that Canada culture is a fertile ground for the cultivating of doubleness as its history shows: native/colonial, federal/provincial, not to mention English/French”; however, the great doubleness experienced by Anglo-Canadian writers is the fact that they share a language with Britain which is also “a past political force”¹⁶. In other words, the formation of the cultural heritage of Canada still has an impact on this perception of the country as a divided culture.

Joan's view of Canadian literature brings into question this duality, which Canadian writers and artists have to face, and especially the difficulty in defining their writing style and artistic identity in the face of British culture. Ironically, Joan only begins her artistic career when she is living in England. MacLean claims that in *Lady Oracle*, England “may be viewed as a metaphor for the cryptic recesses of the Canadian psyche”¹⁷. In the view of the above mentioned facts, the novel foregrounds this sense of continuation toward England in Anglophone Canadian culture.

One of Joan's lovers, the Canadian poet Chuck also experiences the dominance of British tradition in Canadian cultural identity. Like Joan, this Canadian poet adopts a pseudonym, the Royal Porcupine. His artistic name gives him a status of “Royalist” since she wants to express this appreciation of the Queen. Conversely, the Royal Porcupine does not approve of the Canadian

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London, 1989, pp. 33-34.

¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*. Oxford UP, Toronto, 1991, pp.1.

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁷ Susan MacLean, “*Lady Oracle*: The Art of Reality and the Reality of Art”, *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 28-29 (1980), pp.181.

national symbol, the beaver, because he thinks it reminds too much of the nineteenth century¹⁸, and thus, of the English Empire in Canada. The Royal Porcupine's strong relation with British tradition in contrast to his nationalistic position points out the tension which Anglophone Canadians undergo to define who they are.

Lady Oracle also reveals the Canadian writers' dilemmas to define their cultural identities when they attempt to create their literature. Joan's and Chuck's relation to England represents the bond between Canadian and British cultures, while, on the other hand, it challenges British traditional literary conventions and cultural identity. Margaret Atwood has expressed a strong concern about Canadian literature under the influence of British heritage. In an interview about her book *Survival*¹⁹, Atwood points out that its purpose is "to establish, one that Canadian literature existed, and two, that it was different from English and American literature"²⁰. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the Canadian writer and protagonist of *Lady Oracle* struggles with the conflict between her own culture and the British cultural identity and literary tradition.

The tension between North American and British cultural tradition has been widely discussed in literary criticism. The difficulty that Canadians and Americans undergo to define a literary tradition of their own seems to be a consequence of their cultural heritage. In his analysis of the double in North American literary tradition, Miller claims that the double represents dual nationality²¹. According to this author, North-American writers' choice for the romance and, more specifically, the Gothic mode of literature—which is adopted by the protagonist of *Lady Oracle*—reflects the tension present in their culture. As the romance becomes part of Anglo-American literature, it entered a divided relationship between old and new, rejecting the past which it was nevertheless to resume and perpetuate²². In the case of Canada, by using the language they hold in common with Great Britain, Canadians "have great difficulty in distinguishing themselves from the citizens of [Great Britain] but also in creating their own cultural artifacts"²³. Although *Lady Oracle* addresses the tension which Canadian writers experience to define their literary tradition, Joan still adopts the Gothic genre in her fiction. Her choice for this traditional British literary genre not only reflects the influence of this culture in Canadian literature, but also criticizes and subverts this literary convention.

Joan's Costume Gothics are not simply a copy of the conventional British Gothic. Her writing can also be seen as an attempt to break with the dilemmas experienced in Canadian literature. In a first moment, however, Joan seems to

¹⁸ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 239.

¹⁹ Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Anansi, Toronto, 1972. pp. 182.

²⁰ This interview is quoted in Mary Kirtz, "(Dis)unified Field Theories: The Clarendon Lectures Seen through (a) *Cat's Eye*", en *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction*. Org. Sharon R. Wilson. Ohio State UP, Columbus, 2003, pp. 55.

²¹ Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History*. Oxford UP, Oxford, 1985, pp. 416.

²² Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History*, pp. 249.

²³ Mary Kirtz, "(Dis)unified Field Theories: The Clarendon Lectures Seen through (a) *Cat's Eye*", pp. 59.

accept the Gothic tradition. When Joan arrives in England she expects “princess, castles, the Lady of Shalott floating down a winding river in a boat, as in *Narratives Poems for Juniors*, which [she] studies in Grade Nine”²⁴. Her first novels reflect this necessity for escapism and the view of romance of this inexperienced writer. Nevertheless, the more Joan's writing ability develops, the more she criticizes the literary conventions of this genre, such as the marketing, not to mention the passive and flat characters which she creates. Using a powerful strategy, parody, Joan revisits and questions the conventions of the Gothic genre.

Linda Hutcheon states that “parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; it is always critical.” For Hutcheon, “through a double process of installing and ironizing parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference”²⁵. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan begins to reflect back on the Gothic tradition with a critical perspective while she contests her own writing and the past literary conventions, which her fiction adopts. The protagonist realizes that her Gothic Costumes are “worse than trash” and “escapist”²⁶. Moreover, she criticizes her own books pointing out the politics behind the characterization of the heroines in the Gothic tradition. She becomes critical of her gothic heroine, who is the “eternal virgin on the run, [her] goddess of quick money”²⁷.

As Joan's critical sense increases, she also goes beyond the criticism and begins to parody two literary genres part of the British literary tradition. Her last two books, *Lady Oracle* and *Stalked by Love* are parodies of the Victorian poetry and the Gothic. In *Lady Oracle*, there is an allusion to the Victoria poem “The Lady of Shalott”²⁸. Like the Lady of Shalott, the female figure Joan sees in the mirror and writes about, Lady Oracle, sings and is also “voyaging standing in the prow” and “voyaging... in the death boat”²⁹. Nevertheless, different from Tennyson's representation of the female subject which is restrained in the flat and traditional mirror, Joan's character Lady Oracle is more powerful and carries multiple personalities because she is “one and three/ The dark lady the redgold lady/ the blank lady oracle/ of blood”³⁰. Her book of poems is also a critical reference to the Gothic conventions. Although Joan realizes that the book is similar to her standard Costume Gothics, she is aware that something is awkward: it is “a Gothic gone wrong. It was upside down somehow. There were the suffering, the hero in the mask of villain, the villain in the mask of hero ... but there was no happy ending, no true love”³¹. What Joan recognizes is that her works no longer provide a copy of the traditional British gothic, but a mockery of this nineteenth-century literary convention.

²⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 141.

²⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, pp. 93.

²⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 31.

²⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 129.

²⁸ Lord Alfred Tennyson, “The Lady of Shalott” en *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Greenblatt, eds. Norton, New York, 2000. 1920-24.

²⁹ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 221.

³⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 225.

³¹ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, pp. 232.

In *Stalked by Love*, Joan also dismantles the literary conventions of the Gothic. Her fiction questions the formula, which says that her female antagonist, Felicia, has to become insane or die, such as what happens to Bertha in *Jane Austen* and to Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*³². Although Joan “knew what had to happen. Felicia had to die; such was the fate of wives”³³, the writer begins to sympathize with the antagonist and shifts the story into Felicia’s point of view. Eleonora Rao claims that this strategy renders “a rereading of the Gothic tradition in *Lady Oracle*, where several generic strands and modes are interwoven. In a typical postmodern operation, this novel revisits the past ironically rewriting and using popular fiction to produce a non-escapist text.” Rao also argues that the several genres used in Joan’s novels point out that British literary conventions are parodied with several other literary modes. When the novel presents several other genres, “the Harlequin romance, Victorian poetry, concrete poetry and Picaresque”³⁴, Joan also breaks with rigid genre distinctions and highlights the plurality of literature.

Hence, *Lady Oracle* is a self-conscious narrative, which reflects on the writer’s artistic development, bringing into question the construction of the character’s subjectivity through fiction. Besides, this narrative also shows that writing is a creative process which gives the writer the opportunity to revise and re-write literary conventions of the past in a very critical way. In this critical view of the construction of the writer’s subjectivity and of the production of literature, the novel does not privilege any of sides of the binary oppositions which create the tensions experienced by Joan, such as art and life, author and character, British and Canadian literatures. Joan reflects on her multiple identities as a writer. Furthermore, when her works subvert the traditional literary conventions, which are rooted in British culture, Joan also emphasizes how creative and complex Canadian literature can be. In this sense, “The plurality and juxtaposition of different styles in the novel appear then to find a correspondence in the scattered identification of its character”³⁵. Joan’s complex fiction underlines that, just like she carries multiple identities, she adopts several genres in her writing, preventing her from choosing a single literary genre or a particular cultural identity. By showing the creativity of Canadian literature, *Lady Oracle* points out that Canadian writer Joan critically reflects on simplistic definitions of Canadian artistic production and of cultural identity without seeing her culture and identity as derivations of British cultural tradition.

³² In the conventions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic literature, the hero’s wife, often playing the role of the villainess, must die so that the plot could fit in the happy ending for the hero and the heroine. The tragic death of characters such as Bertha in *Jane Austen* and Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* illustrates this gothic convention.

³³ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 316.

³⁴ Eleonora Rao, “Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*: Writing against Notions of Unity”, en *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity*. Org. Colin Nicholson, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1994, pp134.

³⁵ Eleonora Rao, “Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*: Writing against Notions of Unity”, pp.146.

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