



## THEME OF THIRST FOR IDENTITY AND TROUBLING FOR SURVIVAL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *LADY ORACLE* BY MARGARET ATWOOD

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### ABSTRACT



Lady Oracle (1976) is a Meta fictional novel, narrated from the perspective of a woman writer who interweaves the story of her life with excerpts from the books she writes, pieces of criticism on them and commentaries on the act of writing. The novel is built on intermingled and juxtaposed narrative levels. The main narrative course that tells the story of the writer and the protagonist, Joan Foster is broken, now and then, to give room to the stories she writes, such as *Stalked by Love*, which is totally reproduced, and *The Lord of Chesney Chase, Love, My Ransom, Escape for Love, and Lady Oracle* (a book of poems), which we know of through references or fragments. Throughout her life she tries to escape from others in order to survive and wants to prove her identity. Thus, the novel deals with the pathetic life story of a young woman writer.

**Keywords:** *Identity, Survival, Self-victimization, Victim of Illusions.*



*"I thought, men who changed their names were likely to be con-men, criminals, undercover agents or magicians, whereas women who changed their names were probably just married."*

- Margaret Atwood.

Joan Foster is a young woman with numerous identities and a talent for shedding them at will. She has written trashy gothic romances, had affairs with a Polish count and an absurd avant-garde artist, and played at being a politically engaged partner to her activist husband. After a volume of her poetry becomes an unexpected literary sensation, her new fame attracts a blackmailer threatening to reveal her secrets. Joan's response is to fake her own death and flee to a hill town in Italy. But what at first seems to be just another attempt to escape herself becomes instead an occasion for confronting the self-deception that has driven her since childhood. Studded with hair-raising comic escapades and piercing psychological insights, *Lady Oracle* is both hilarious and profound novel.

Throughout much of *Lady Oracle* Joan Foster succumbs to various delusions. Unconsciously dissatisfied with both her private and professional life, she refuses to recognize even the fact of her own unhappiness and, instead of confronting her present condition, retreats to hazy dreams of the future or myopic remembrances of the past. But this character deals in the same malady from which she suffers. Indeed, the first hint of the complexity of the novel is the fact that Atwood's protagonist is herself a novelist, a writer of Costume Gothics. Ironically, Joan Foster, a victim of illusions – her own and those of others – is, as Louisa K. Delacourt (an assumed name), also a professional spinner of illusions. Thus the theme expands, for we see here Atwood's comically idiosyncratic version of literary mimesis. Unreal art imitates unrealized life. Out of past personal unhappiness and present dissatisfactions, the narrator-novelist of *Lady Oracle* weaves the stuff of dreams. Reality becomes romance; the author's imperfect biography is at least temporarily superseded by the fairy tale plots of her fiction.

It is equally futile to try to live a fantasy, as is particularly demonstrated by Joan Foster's marriage.

Within that relationship, she plays the role of a compassionate helpmate who can see her husband through his frequent social and psychic crises while having none herself. But Atwood does not expect us to sympathize with this put-upon protagonist. On the contrary, we see how Joan's marital role-playing both derives from and continues the pretense that preceded marriage. From the first, she claims social concerns and crams Communist philosophy in order to present herself to Arthur as a fellow traveller and an ideal prospective spouse. With that future ruled out, Joan increasingly turns to her past.

Joan's life is unresolved in other respects too. For example, although she loses some one hundred pounds, she continues to see herself as "the Fat Lady." That image haunts her nightmares and underlies her perpetual fear that she will be "recognized" by someone out of her past. Physically slim and beautiful, she remains, emotionally, a bitter, self-conscious adolescent. Because her sense of self is nebulous and even self-negating, she readily allows herself to be defined by others. Thus, as a child, even though Joan became obese partly in retaliation against her mother, that obesity allows her no autonomy. Yet as a slim and attractive adult, Joan functions mostly as an extension of the various men that she meets and fulfills their fantasies instead of their fulfilling hers.

*I planned my death carefully, unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. My life had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror.*

This is where we are when the novel begins. Caught in the kaleidoscope of conflicting identities, Joan tries to free herself from them all. But we soon see that her early demise is not much different from the rest of her life - the shadow passing for the reality, and not passing very successfully. She could not even "expire" independently. She acted with accomplices. There were witnesses. Consequently, by the conclusion of the novel, Joan finds that she must return to Canada, admit that her "death" was all an



act, and confess the reasons for the charade in order to exonerate the two friends who await trial for her murder. That failure, however, is also a fortunate fall. Inadvertently, her feigned death finally forces her to repudiate various false identities. Until then, however, her ostensible drowning is part of a symbiotic pattern whereby unconscious self-victimization and ineffectual escape fantasy each fosters the other.

Joan has finally begun to see the futility of certain fantasy escapes. In her life and, even more so, in her Gothic romances, a fictitious past, ostensibly a palliative for an imperfect present, both reflects and perpetuates that present. Consequently, her books - and her life - have not been so much an escape as an evasion.

Thus Margaret Atwood opens her novel *Lady Oracle*. The novel is paradigmatic, for it illuminates a specular play of openness and closure, of sameness and difference, of multiple voices and resounding silences. As Atwood's work progresses, the text, like the heroine's life, opens, spreads, and multiplies beyond boundaries. The open form of *Lady Oracle* is integrally related to a problem which has influenced modern feminist theory: the problem of articulating what has been silenced by a language which reduces the other to the same. In her attempt to express a female language which has been repressed, Atwood does not begin outside the boundaries of phallogocentric discourse. Instead, she presents what Linda Hutcheon refers to as an "unmasking of dead conventions by challenging, by mirroring."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout *Lady Oracle*, the multiplicity of allusions to the mirrors of other texts frustrates the reader's desire for a binary system which establishes a dominant subject. At one point in the work, Atwood presents an overlapping of texts, of layers of narration, a remarkable specular play which forces the reader to participate actively in the production of the text. Within Atwood's work are Joan Foster's novels, which, in turn, echo other texts. Moreover, Atwood underlines the relationship between death and the framed picture, for she gives an example of a label for an artwork.

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