Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia

Master's Degree Programme

in European, American and
Postcolonial Language and Literature

Final Thesis

Breakdown as Breakthrough: Female Emancipation in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*

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Matriculation number
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Academic Year
2018 / 2019

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Introduction

> What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror: it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. (Atwood "Survival" 12 – 13)

This passage, taken from Margaret Atwood's work of literary criticism *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, best describes the writer's own concept of literature, which she has loved since she was a little girl. Indeed, she started writing poems at the age of six and decided that she wanted to be a professional writer at the age of sixteen. The above-mentioned quote also highlights the power of literature to shape national identity and, most importantly in this case, women's literary culture. Women's issues and condition are widely explored by Atwood in her novels, starting with *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, which are the main focus of this work.

This dissertation analyzes Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing,* especially focusing on their two female protagonists, Marian and the Surfacer, and their inner journeys towards female emancipation and empowerment. This work stems from a strong interest for Margaret Atwood and her works, which was undoubtedly fueled by a Canadian Literature course held by Ca' Foscari University. The decision to deal specifically with the topic of female victimization in patriarchal society arises from my Erasmus+ experience in

Warsaw, which led me to delve into feminism and the Me Too Movement, thus expanding my knowledge on women's issues. This dissertation, which provides a detailed analysis of women's condition in Atwood's first two novels, is the result of a close reading of the latter and a careful scrutiny of a great deal of secondary materials, mainly online articles.

The aim of this work is to show how *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* are very similar in the way they present a female protagonist who is victim of patriarchal society, but is able to escape her condition, thus emerging as an enlightened adult woman. Also, by comparing the journeys the two female protagonists undertake, this dissertation highlights how women's plight in society used to be, and unfortunately still is, basically the same all over the world, as patriarchy is deeply rooted everywhere[2]. It is no coincidence that Atwood has chosen not to give the protagonist of *Surfacing* a name, thus making her the representative of all women. In short, this work aims at offering an interpretation of Atwood's first two novels as *Bildungsroman*, where Marian and the nameless protagonist of *Surfacing* develop a moral identity and a high sense of responsibility thanks to the adversities they stumble upon and the experiences they go through in their lifetime.

The Edible Woman and *Surfacing* were written respectively in 1969 and 1972, an era of big change for women, which followed the unfortunate wave of bigotry of the 1950s. Indeed, the 1950s is remembered as the "Stay at Home, Mum" era, during which women used to spend most of their time in the kitchen, baking, cooking, cleaning, knitting and taking care of their children and husband. Unsurprisingly, they began to feel a sense of dissatisfaction with their lives and started undergoing an identity crisis, which soon became a national issue. Atwood's

2 Of course women's burden can change according to other factors, primarily race and social status.

novels emerged exactly in this period, during which an awareness of women's issues spread as a reaction to the social conformity typical of the 1950s. The social context surrounding the two novels has been taken into high consideration while writing this dissertation.

The present work is structured in three chapters; the third one is divided, in its turn, in other four sub-chapters. The first one presents a short introduction to the author, Margaret Atwood, mainly discussing her relationship to Canada and feminism, while the second one examines female madness, focusing on its role and function in history and literature.

The main focus of the dissertation is provided in the third chapter, since it centers on the two protagonists' inner journeys towards self-awareness and self-reliance. Marian's and the Surfacer's odysseys have been closely analyzed by dividing them into three main stages. In the first phase the two protagonists start off as victims of patriarchal society and its unwritten rules: they are too willing to do what others want and to accept their opinions, they consider themselves powerless, they are oppressed by gender roles and are not able to get out of the manipulative relationship they are in. The second phase is a direct consequence of the long period of oppression the two protagonists have suffered from: madness. As will be seen in the second chapter of this dissertation, madness, which has been perceived for centuries as a feminine illness and still continues to be gendered now, was commonly thought to be a consequence of patriarchal indoctrination and oppression. In *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* the two narrators experience a harsh form of madness which, in the case of Marian, may be considered a strange form of anorexia nervosa, while, in the case of the Surfacer, could probably be schizophrenia and/or post-traumatic stress disorder. Last but not least, the third phase, which sees Marian and the Surfacer recover and get their identities back, highlights how

madness, which has undoubtedly put a strain on both protagonists, at last proved to be extremely beneficial.

Eventually, the last section of this work, which will focus on the novels' ambiguous endings, tries to deal with the question that probably grips readers the most once the books are over: are the two female narrators really free after all? Of course there is no final answer, but some conclusions will be drawn.

In short, it may be claimed that this dissertation poses three main questions which will ultimately try to be answered: in what way are Marian and the Surfacer and their inner journeys towards female emancipation similar? Is madness a product of patriarchy? Will the two protagonists eventually free themselves completely of patriarchal oppression and male dominance or is the final freedom only apparent?

1

Margaret Atwood: One of a Kind

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada, in 1939 to Margaret Dorothy, a former nutritionist, and Carl Edmund Atwood, a forest entomologist, and grew up in Northern Ontario and Quebec. Her father used to work in the forest and often brought his entire family with him during his scientific explorations. As a consequence, Atwood spent most of her quite unusual childhood in the Canadian wilderness, an element which is often to be found in her writing. Having been introduced to this alternative lifestyle out of the mainstream Canadian way of life, she did not have any contact with her peers and did not attend school. She started appreciating literature and reading really soon in her life, since that was the only way for her to learn while in the wilderness. It was not until she was five that she began to live primarily in the city and not in the bush anymore. She started attending school in 1951 and, although she had begun writing plays and poems at the age of six, only by sixteen she was absolutely sure she wanted to become a serious writer.

While studying for her Bachelor's Degree at Victoria College in the University of Toronto, she developed an interest in Canadian literature, which turned out to be quite revealing, as it led her to contribute to the shaping of the Canadian literary landscape. In 1962 she obtained her Master's Degree at Radcliffe College of Harvard University, but never finished her doctoral studies. She returned to Toronto, where she started working for a market research company, but soon moved to Vancouver to lecture at the University of British Columbia. During that period of her life Atwood was writing her first novel, which will be

published in 1969. After having returned to Harvard and having left once again, she accepted a teaching position at Sir George Williams University in Montreal and at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. At the time Atwood wanted to become a serious writer and started writing, there was little sense of what Canadian literature actually was and whether there was one body of work called Canadian literature. That is why her decision to take on the writing life was doubly unusual, being her a Canadian woman. Although she was totally sure she wanted to become a writer, in "Great Unexpectations" she recalls: "I was scared to death. I was scared to death for a couple of reasons. For one thing, I was Canadian, and the prospects for being a Canadian and a writer, both at the same time, in the 1960, were dim" (Van Spanckeren 13). She held several jobs early in her life, but her creativity and passion for writing got the better of her.

As a writer during a time in which the canon of Canadian literature had not been formed yet, Atwood's influence on its formation and development has been huge, especially through her collection of poems *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and her non-fictional work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature.* In these two works Atwood started portraying wilderness as a distinctively Canadian space (Howells, *Margaret Atwood* 21). Her attempt to show the importance of asserting a national identity and that Canadian literature was distinct from the American and the English' is certainly to be found in her book *Survival*, the first book of criticism on Canadian literature. In *Survival* Margaret Atwood argues that every country has a symbol, which represents the nation worldwide. The central symbol of Canada is survival, the idea of staying alive in the face of difficulties and disasters. She claims that, while earlier literature dealt with external dangers to one's survival, such as the climate or nature

itself, more recently writers tend to explore human beings' internal obstacles, such as fear or life itself. Canadian literature, Atwood argues, deals not with successful stories of those who made it, that is a typical American pattern, but with those who survived and were able to make it back from a difficult experience. By imagining Canada as a victim, she presents what she calls the "Basic Victim Positions", which are the grades of awareness of the victims in relation to the Victor/Victim relationship. At the end of the first chapter Atwood finally states that the fact that survival and the victim motif are central symbols of Canada is certainly linked to its own history as a difficult land to live in and as an oppressed and exploited colony under the power of the British Crown. (ch. 1)

Dealing with the early difficult encounter with Canadian literature, the beginning of *Survival* goes like this:

> I started reading Canadian literature when I was young, though I didn't know that; in fact, I wasn't aware that I was living in a country with any distinct existence of its own. At school we were being taught to sing "Rule Britannia" and to draw the Union Jack; after hours we read stacks of Captain Marvel, Plastic Man and Batman comic books…However, someone had given us (early Canadian novelist and poet) Charles G.D. Roberts' *Kings in Exile* for Christmas, and I snivelled my way quickly through these heart wrenching stories of animals caged, trapped and tormented. That was followed by Ernest Thompson Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known*, if anything more upsetting because the animals were more actual –they lived in forests, not circuses– and their deaths more mundane: the deaths, not of tigers, but of rabbits. No one called these stories Canadian literature, and I wouldn't have paid any attention if they had; as far as I was concerned they were just something else to read, along with Walter Scott, Edgar Allan Poe and Donald Duck. . . . I read them primarily to be entertained, as I do now. . . . I read the backs of Shredden Wheat boxes as an idle pastime, Captain Marvel and Walter Scott as fantasy escape – I knew, even then, that wherever I lived it wasn't there, since I'd never seen a castle and the Popsicle Pete prizes advertised on the comic book covers either weren't available in Canada, or cost more – and Seton and Roberts as, believe it or not, something closer to real

> life. I had seen animals, quite few of them; a dying porcupine was more real to me than a knight in armour or Clark Kent's Metropolis. (23 – 24)

As can be easily grasped from this long quote taken from Atwood's survey on Canadian literature, when she first started reading it, she did not know what it was that she was reading and that her country had a distinct literature of its own. Atwood's writings certainly deal with the protagonists' search for an identity, which usually happens in a dangerous and male-dominated world, which they need to fight in order to get what they want. But not only do Atwood's protagonists look for their own personal identity, but they even search for a national one. Indeed, as Canadian literature's existence was not even taken into consideration at the time Atwood started writing, Canadian writers were not considered seriously, but rather "a freak of nature, like duck-billed platypuses . . . they ought not to exist, and when they did so anyway, they were just pathetic imitations of the real thing" (Atwood in Van Spanckeren 13). Moreover, when Atwood was attending school, Canadian literature was not taught as an independent subject yet. In fact Canada became independent from the UK only in 1982 and consequently the canonization of Canadian literature happened really late compared to other countries. Only in 1965, with the publication of the first Literary History of Canada, the creation of the canon became possible and the institution of Canadian literature was finally born. The creation and development of the canon was really tough even throughout the late 20th century, because Canada found it difficult to find its own voice, having USA as its southern neighbor and having been under the influence of the British for so long. Despite that, the country had been developing an increasing awareness of its own national identity, as being

distinguishable from American and English identities and Margaret Atwood was undoubtedly central to the development and definition of Canadian literature ever since.

Atwood's key role in the development of Canadian literature lies in the fact that as she "discovered her voice as a Canadian writer of poetry, fiction, and literary criticism, she helped the country discover its own life as a literary landscape" (Staines in Howells, "The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood" 19). During her writing career she has addressed themes and subjects related to Canada and, more specifically, related to the encounter between English and French cultures in Canada and its relationship with the United States of America. The latter is often to be found in her written works, especially in Atwood's second novel *Surfacing*, where the readers are confronted with a harsh criticism of American consumerism and violence, as well as in *The Edible Woman*, in which American consumer culture is visibly present through Marian's menial job and relationship with Peter.

Not only is Atwood's writing affected by the quest of Canadianness and national identity, but her novels are also a product of their time, as they investigate gender politics, female subjectivity and inner psyche in the age of the sparking of the second wave of feminism, maybe one of the most significant among the several ones. In most of her writing she investigates the conflict between the (female) self and society, writing about women both as victims and monstrous creatures. In many of her novels, having as their protagonists women fighting against their social alienation and turning from naive to insightful, feminist debates provide a really important context (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle* and *Bodily Harm* are only a few examples). In Atwood's writings women are portrayed as powerful and determined enough to obtain what they are looking for (an identity of their

own), but inevitably subjugated by the patriarchal society. Because of this much of the criticism about Atwood is decidedly of a feminist kind and, consequently, she is considered a feminist writer. Despite that, she has never appreciated people considering her a feminist writer, because she has always refused to publicly align with the movement. Indeed, after publishing *The Edible Woman* she claimed: “I don’t consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism. That part of it is simply social reporting. It was written in 1965 and that’s what things were like in 1965” (Atwood quoted in Kaminski 27). But although she does not want her novels to be considered “feminist”, they undoubtedly interact with feminist issues. In an interview with Castro, while talking about Susanna Moodie, a Canadian author who wrote about her experiences in Canada when it was still a British colony, Atwood claims:

> Let's go back to Susanna Moodie. There are a lot of things that she didn't say, partly because they weren't choices; they weren't available to be said. She wouldn't even have considered saying them. Writing her memoirs, it wouldn't have even entered her consciousness to put in a chapter on her sex life. That wouldn't have been a choice. It would just be completely blotted out. I think that probably in a century or so people will look back at writing of this period and say, why were they repressing X? We don't know what X is yet. Because we aren't conscious of it. We don't know what they are going to say that we were repressing. But I'm sure there's some- thing. I'm sure there are a lot of things that somebody looking back at us will be able to see that we just don't see because it's not a choice for us to see it. It's not part of our vocabulary at this time. So I think a lot of the energy in women's writing over the past ten years, and there has been a tremendous amount of energy, has come from being able to say things that once you couldn't say. And therefore, being able to see things that once you couldn't see, or that you would have seen but repressed, or that you would have seen and put another interpretation on, and those things are changing all the time and that's part of the interesting thing about writing. (Atwood in Castro 231).

As can be grasped from this quote and from all her writing about women, although she does not consider herself a member of the feminist movement and is very reluctant to align

with this or any particular ideology, she seems to support feminism and women's equality under the law. Responding to whether Atwood and her books are feminist or not, Katharine Viner, in an interview with Margaret Atwood for *The Guardian*, states:

> Atwood is absolutely a feminist - many years of standing up for equality, supporting women workers, writing letters, protesting, testify to that. But that her books are feminist has sometimes been questioned - mainly because it is women who are evil in her fiction, not men. It could be argued, however, that her work is feminist in a much less literal and more mature sense, in that it features women who are good and bad, neat and messy; normal, damaged, whole, human. (n.p.)

Despite the difficulties in trying to determine whether Atwood's books are feminist or not, the feminist context that surrounds her writing certainly provides significant elements in her novels. Her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, was written and published in the 1960s, when the second-wave feminism sparked. The 1950s is remembered as a very tough decade for women, above all in America, as it was characterized by a great rise in conservatism, social and racial inequality, social conformity and by a great emphasis on marriage, children, family life and the role of the housewife as central to society, especially in the suburbs. The 1950s relied on a very strict separation of the gender roles, according to which men were the breadwinners and women were supposed to stay home, take care of the house, children and husband, all of which was supported by the government, which launched a campaign to make sure women were confined to the domestic environment. The oppressive climate of the 1950s in America led to the uprising of women, who, in the late 1950s, felt the "perfect life" they were expected to lead was not that perfect. They were so busy doing laundries, changing diapers, cleaning and cooking, that they lost the sense of their own identity and did not know who they were anymore. The sense of emptiness women were feeling at that time was then

referred to as “the problem that has no name” by the American writer and activist Betty Friedan, who perfectly embodied women's sense of oppression and social alienation in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, which was a great contribution to the emerging of the second-wave feminism and led to a great deal of progress as far as equality is concerned such as the establishment of the NOW[3].

The 1950s were also a decade in which an interest to explore new issues and ideas emerged and many began to question long established institutions such as segregation and inequality. This social atmosphere provided breeding ground for the development of the new wave of feminism in the early 1960s. In *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan goes to the heart of women's problems, reporting the words of a mother of four and a twenty-three-year-old mother claiming that despite they had everything they could dream of, a husband, a marriage, children, a house, and tried everything women were supposed to, gardening, canning, socializing, these activities did not leave anything to them, leading to a feeling of dissatisfaction and emptiness, as they felt like having no personality or career ambitions anymore, except that of being wives and mothers (16, 17). Betty Friedan fully embodied American women's feelings of confusion and desperation and her *Feminine Mystique* functioned as a sort of comfort to their most asked question at that time: who am I really?

Thanks to Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* women finally understood they were not alone in thinking that their perfect life was not perfect at all; the awareness of the individual crisis every woman was experiencing led to the rise of a collective consciousness and a growing interest in the matter, making the sparking of the second-wave feminism possible. This

3 National Organization for Women.

certainly broadened the debate about women and equality and drew attention to “new” issues that were rarely discussed earlier such as sexuality, abortion, divorce, domestic violence, birth control or reproductive rights. The achievements linked to the second-wave feminism reacting to the oppressive climate of the 1950s were several: the approval of the pill by the Food and Drug Administration (1960), President’s Commission on the Status of Women (1961), Equal Pay Act (1963), the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission began operations (1965), the creation of the National Organization for Women (1966), the proposal of the Bill of Rights, Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII) and much more. It is no surprise that Atwood's novels, and especially her first ones (*The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*) were born out of this age of great changes for women.

2

Women and Madness: a Gendered Problem?

“For centuries, women have occupied a unique place in the annals of insanity.” (Ussher 1) So it begins the first chapter of *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience* by Jane M. Ussher, stating that since the eighteenth century women have being outnumbering men in diagnoses of mental illnesses, hospitalization and the reception of psychiatric treatment (1). Does this mean women are madder than men? Not really. One of the most significant theories trying to investigate the reason why women seem to be more likely to become mad was certainly provided by the WHO's *World Health Report* in 1998: “Women's health is inextricably linked to their status in society. It benefits from equality, and suffers from discrimination. Today, the status and well-being of countless millions of women worldwide remains tragically low. As a result, human well-being suffers, and the prospects for future generations are dimmer.” (6) According to this view women's higher rate of mental issues seems to be due to their social situation, their confining roles as daughters, wives, mothers and women in general, and to the patriarchal society's mistreatment of the female minority: gender pay gap, gender inequalities and discrimination, sexism, violence, women treated as sexual objects and the presence, in most societies, of restrictive and constraining gender roles all contribute to make women more likely to develop depression, anxiety, or any other type of distress. Of course it is important not to neglect the fact that other factors in women, such as

ethnicity and social class, play a significant role in determining why they tend to suffer more from mental health issues.

What partly contributed to all of this is certainly the profession of psychiatry, which has been indeed harshly criticized by many for its mistreatment and oppression of women. As Phyllis Chesler commented in her book *Women and madness*, “Most twentieth century women who are psychiatrically labeled, privately treated and publicly hospitalized are not mad . . . they may be deeply unhappy, self-destructive, economically powerless, and sexually impotent. . . but as women they're supposed to be.” (25) What Chesler means is that diagnosis, pathologization and treatment of women and their mental illnesses proves to be, and have been, more often than people may think, gender biased. As Jane Ussher states, in the Middle Ages women who had symptoms of hysteria, such as strange body pains or paralysis, were deemed to be possessed by evil spirits and to be burnt as witches (66). Indeed the Salem witch trials, which swept English colonies during the seventeenth century, were certainly not based on real medical or scientific reports, but rather on the conviction that some women, the majority of the accused ones were women, possessed magical evil skills. The trials were one of the early forms of mass hysteria, probably the most infamous one together with the “Red Scare” of the 1950s. Of course witch trials revealed themselves to function merely as a way to oppress and constrain women, whom Puritans considered to be weaker and more likely to be sinners than men.

But the situation in the nineteenth and twentieth century did not improve that much, as women used to be unwillingly hospitalized, imprisoned and subjected to several treatments, all of which, paradoxically, was what made it impossible to lead a normal life and drove them

insane (Ussher 66). The treatments these women were subjected to hardly made them feel better or less distressed, as can be easily grasped from the account of Lydia A Smith in 1878, which can be found in Harris' and Geller's *Women from the Asylum: Voices from Behind the Walls 1840 - 1945*:

> In a most inhumane way I was plunged into a bath, the water of which was not quite boiling hot, and held down by a strong grip on my throat, until I felt a strange sensation and everything began to turn black. . . . When I became conscious I found myself jerked from one side to the other, with my hands confined to the stocks, or `muff,' as it is termed in the asylum, and a stout leather belt attached to an iron buckle, was around me . . . at this point I was . . . taken (or rather jerked) into a small division off from the main hall, and thrown into a `crib.' This is a square box, on which is a cover, made to close and lock, and has huge posts, separated so as to leave a small space between for ventilation. The strap attached to the `muff' was fastened to the `crib' in such a manner as to tighten around my waist, and across the pit of my stomach, with such a pressure that it actually seemed to me that I could not breathe. My feet were fastened to the foot of the `crib' so tight, and remained there so long, that when they did unfasten them they were so swollen that it was impossible for me to stand on them. . . . This was my first experience of an insane asylum. (133, 134)

Given the constant cultural association of women and mental disorder, it is not surprising that the character of the "madwoman" has become a culturally significant figure within art and literature. One of the most significant non-fictional work in English written literature is undoubtedly *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, written in 1979. In the book the two writers argue that throughout the 19th century women needed to fight harshly in order to see their identity as artists fully established in a male-dominated world. Gubar and Gilbert address the issue of the depiction of women in male writing, which was mostly negative, as it included female characters either depicted as submissive angels, accepting their condition with passivity because they could not do

otherwise, or as ugly monsters. The character of the madwoman, which was one of the most common representations of women in writing imposed limitations on females, and especially on female writers, who saw themselves forced to assimilate that image as well, giving them no chance to reach any self-realization ("Madness In Womens Texts: Insanity And Patriarchy" n.p.). Although the representation of the madwoman is originally negative, Gilbert and Gubar interpret this character as a tool of resistance against patriarchal oppression: it is a direct consequence of women's anxieties, when confronted with the female depiction in men's books and with social inequalities in society. Basically according to them the madwoman expresses women's and, specifically, the female authors' reluctance to contain their rage at living in a male-dominated world and willingness to get rid of all the constraints society poses upon them.

The Madwoman in the Attic argues that the image of the madwoman haunts a large portion of English-written literature of the 19th century as the representation of women's anxiety, rage and rebellion against the society they are living in, which tended to exclude them from the main activities of life. In 19th century female novels the bond between author and female protagonist is really close, as the latter seems to become a double of the writer, in expressing their will to rebel against patriarchy. Indeed the mental breakdowns that female characters go through are usually reflected in their own authors as well. Virginia Woolf is a clear example of a female writer, who wrote about women suffering because of patriarchal oppression, who fell into the deep dark hole of "madness" herself, which led her to several depression episodes, mood swings and to her final suicide, preceded by a moving farewell letter to her husband.

One of the most well-known and influential texts of the 19th century regarding women and madness is certainly the novel *The Madwoman in the Attic* has taken its title from: *Jane Eyre*. *Jane Eyre* certainly embodies the feelings of rebellion, rage and anxiety of the author Charlotte Brontë towards a society, which does not want to include women into the public life. Indeed, what shocked Victorian society the most at the time of *Jane Eyre* publication, was "its "anti-Christian" refusal to accept the forms, customs, and standards of society — in short, its rebellious feminism . . . In other words, what horrified the Victorians was Jane's anger." (Gilbert and Gubar 338). Jane, an orphan who has no place in society, lives with her maternal uncle's family, the Reeds, a very oppressing environment for her, where she is mistreated by both Mrs Reed and her children. She dreams about "some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression — as running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die" (Brontë 16). throughout the whole novel Jane is torn between her integrity and her irrationality: "I could not help it: the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes. Then my sole relief was to walk along the corridor of the third storey, backwards and forwards, safe in the silence and solitude of the spot, and allow my mind's eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it." (131) Jane fights throughout the whole novel in the attempt to reconcile these two aspects of her, which eventually will meet in the attic, when Jane finally encounters Bertha (Gilbert and Gubar 348).

Indeed, the most significant episode in Jane's adult life is the encounter with her double Bertha Mason, Edward's ex-wife who has been kept in the attic of Thornfield Hall for several years because she was considered to be mad. As soon as Jane arrives at Rochester's mansion she hears Bertha's "distinct, formal, mirthless" laugh (Brontë 128). The fact she compares

Thornfield's corridors to Bluebeard's is quite revealing, because it already gives the readers a sense of eeriness, as if Jane had sensed something awkward from the very beginning. Edward Rochester describes Bertha with these words:

> I have been married, and the woman to whom I was married lives! You say you never heard of a Mrs. Rochester at the house up yonder, Wood; but I daresay you have many a time inclined your ear to gossip about the mysterious lunatic kept there under watch and ward. Some have whispered to you that she is my bastard half-sister: some, my cast- off mistress. I now inform you that she is my wife, whom I married fifteen years ago,—Bertha Mason by name; sister of this resolute personage, who is now, with his quivering limbs and white cheeks, showing you what a stout heart men may bear. Cheer up, Dick!—never fear me!—I'd almost as soon strike a woman as you. Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations? Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard!—as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points. I had a charming partner—pure, wise, modest: you can fancy I was a happy man. I went through rich scenes! Oh! my experience has been heavenly, if you only knew it! But I owe you no further explanation. Briggs, Wood, Mason, I invite you all to come up to the house and visit Mrs. Poole's patient, and my wife! You shall see what sort of a being I was cheated into espousing, and judge whether or not I had a right to break the compact, and seek sympathy with something at least human. (352)

Edward claims he has locked Bertha because she was mad and "came of a mad family". But reading these words readers cannot but ask themselves whether it was that imprisonment, which drove her insane. When Jane first sees her, she claims that "what it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face." (353) She is described in terms of an animal, as if she was no human anymore. Bertha Mason is indeed the perfect embodiment of the "madwoman".

During the encounter between the “poor, obscure, plain and little” (305) Jane and the insane Bertha, the latter attempts to strangle Rochester, fights with him and tears Jane's wedding veil. Basically Bertha represents Jane's rebellious and irrational alter-ego, her “truest and darkest double” (Gilbert and Gubar 360) and divided self. She is the one who does everything Jane would like to do, but is reluctant to, because of her integrity and rationality, which prevent her from doing anything crazy. Bertha represents the anger and rebellion Jane has always tried to repress in her life, especially once in Thornfield Hall, in order to be sufficiently socially acceptable and fulfill society's expectations of how women should act and look like. All Bertha's manifestations (such as her eerie laugh) appeared at times of Jane's anger or repression of it and functioned as a completion of Jane's thoughts or actions, for example, Jane's final rage and will to “destroy” Thornfield is echoed by Bertha, who will set fire to it at the end of the novel, even causing an injure to Rochester (Gilbert and Gubar 359, 360). In short Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason perfectly embody the 19th century woman's struggle against a society, which tries to imprison women by posing social, sexual and cultural constraints on them. As Elaine Showalter claims in her *The Female Malady*, this form of madness presented in *Jane Eyre* and in several other novels (she actually talks about hysteria) could be considered as “an unconscious form of feminist protest, the counterpart of the attack on patriarchal values carried out by the women's movement of the time.” (5)

But as we enter the 20th century, although some progress had been made thanks to the early feminism of the suffragette who fought mainly to obtain the right to vote, women still struggled to find their own voice and place within a society, which tended to value the masculine over the feminine. As a consequence the bond between women and insanity

pervaded the 20th century as well: Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* is only one example among the several. Still, one of the most well-known novels about women and insanity, which asserts a close relationship between its protagonist and its author, is Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar.* In *The Bell Jar* Esther Greenwood, a college student, travels to New York to work on a magazine. Although she should be enjoying her time, she "felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo" (Plath 6). It is clear that Esther feels out of place from the very beginning, detached from the other girls, whom she is sharing this experience with, and from the conventional image of women in the 1950s and 1960s. The high expectations society has of women and the strict gender roles women need to stick to are to be seen in Esther's statement about the difficulty to combine one woman's aspirations in life with her inevitable life as a housewife: ". . . after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (70). Esther is neither able to embrace the rebellious attitude of her friend Doreen nor the social conformism of her friend Betsy. She keeps wondering whether she should set for a "normal" life and thus marry or satisfy her ambition of becoming a writer. When Esther returns to Boston, she discovers that she has not been accepted into the writing class she had planned to take. Instead she will spend the summer with her mother. As soon as she discovers that she cannot attend the writing class, she starts feeling desperate: "All through June the writing course had stretched before me like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer. Now I saw it totter and dissolve, and a body in a white blouse and green skirt

plummet into the gap" (91). Soon she finds herself not able to write, read or sleep anymore, because she feels the events that happened to her while in New York are overwhelming and consuming her. Esther's madness (or depression in this case), a direct consequence of society's high expectations of women and, in particular, of society's strict gender roles, which place social limitations on women, causes her to feel like an object of society, having lost her integrity and personal identity. After a failed electric shock therapy, the societal pressures and feelings of objectification led her to attempt suicide several times. Having swallowed several pills, she wakes up in a mental hospital, where she will live for quite a time. When she finally leaves the mental hospital, she is relieved that she has regained her sanity, but she is also conscious that the "bell jar" of madness could descend on her anytime soon.

As can be understood, the close link between gender and madness has led to an outburst of written works by female authors who, mainly through their female protagonists, expressed their rage and rebellion towards patriarchy. If on the one hand the mental breakdown women go through makes their life path harder and threaten their own life, on the other experiencing madness is actually their own, and probably their only, way of speaking up, fighting society, expressing their feelings of rebellion, anger and anxiety, often repressed because of social pressures they are victims of. And eventually, precisely thanks to their experience with madness, they are able to gain their emotional balance back, coming back to life with an increased self-awareness, knowing who they are and what they want in life, having now achieved the self-consciousness and power they initially lacked. This whole process can be witnessed in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, which deal with the theme of the female madness within the context of the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and

early 1970s, using this specific cultural and social context to draw attention to the struggles women have to face in order to find their own voice and identity.

3

Comparing *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*

3.1

Women as Passive Recipients of Society: Marian and the Surfacer Being Victims of Patriarchal Dominance and Expectations

> Since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men . . . This secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural 'feminine' characteristics, but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social traditions under the purposeful control of men . . . This has resulted in the general failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existents associated with men on a plane of intellectual and professional equality, a condition that not only has limited their achievements in many fields but also has given rise to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women. (Beauvoir 84)

This long quote, taken from *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, perfectly summarizes women's long-lasting oppression perpetuated by society and its misogynistic and sexist culture. According to the French feminist writer and philosopher women unintentionally constitute the "second sex" or, more explicitly, the "other" in the sense of "unequal" and "inferior" to men. The term "other" is indeed highly significant, when trying to analyze the position occupied by women in society and Margaret Atwood's first two novels, *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, which undoubtedly interact with so-called "feminist" issues, such as society's oppression of women or the disintegration of their own identity, and deal with female characters as being "other" than men. What Atwood does in her two above-mentioned novels is

challenge and disrupt long-established institutions, like marriage, and gender relations through her depiction of the female protagonist, her typical dark humor and storytelling, thus presenting and unraveling the absurdity of gender roles and the farce of some unwritten social norms that society has made normal, or even almost compulsory, for women to follow.

The Edible Woman and *Surfacing* were published by Margaret Atwood only three years apart, respectively in 1969 and 1972, and seem to have a lot in common especially as far as the two female protagonists are concerned. Marian McAlpin and the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* are both victims of the historical and social context presented in the novels. They seem to be separated from the mainstream stereotypical image of how a woman should act and look like, but, at the same time, they show the typical signs and characteristics of a victim of society, as women living in a strongly patriarchal world, which oppresses females through the presence of absurd gender biases and by forcing them into being always perfect. Both protagonists seem to undergo three phases throughout their respective books which, although slightly different, have a lot in common with each other. The first phase, which will be the focus of this chapter, coincides for the most part with the beginning of the two novels and, in the case of *Surfacing*, with the time preceding the novel itself, and deals with the two protagonists' struggle against the society they are living in: a struggle between their will to maintain their own personality and individuality and society's oppressing standards and expectations. In this very first phase they are both fully immersed in the role of victims, they are oppressed by external forces, passive towards what is happening around them and they are put at a disadvantage in comparison to men. But, most of all, in this phase Marian and the narrator of *Surfacing* are prevented from finding an identity of their own, thus living up to

others' expectations and through other characters' bodies and minds. This first stage could be referred to as the level of victimhood, which is the phase most women go through early in their life, sometimes even without realizing that they, as females, need to do much more effort than men, in order for their personal successes to be fully recognized.

As Atwood herself claimed in the introduction of the book, *The Edible Woman* actually was not her first novel: "The first one . . . had been rejected by all three of the then-existent Canadian publishers for being too gloomy. It ended with heroine deciding whether or not to push the male protagonist off a roof, a conclusion that was well ahead of its time in 1963 and probably too indecisive now" (IX). This short episode is quite revealing about the time Atwood was writing. She published her "first" novel, *The Edible Woman*, in 1969. As soon as the novel came out, the reviews were mixed as they were "divided into people who hadn't caught up with the early women's movement and said this is a novel by a very young woman and she'll get more material later, and those who said this is cutting-edge feminism. Well, actually, it was not quite either one." (Atwood in Viner n.p.). As already noted in the previous chapters, *The Edible Woman* was written throughout 1965, but published only four years later, in 1969, which coincided with the rise of the second-wave of feminism. This is certainly useful and significant, once one comes to analyze Atwood's first novel, but this means that when Atwood was writing it there was no women's movement yet and thus *The Edible Woman* cannot really be considered a product of it.

The Edible Woman is divided into three parts. In the first part, which spans a period of a couple of days preceding the Labor Day and is told in first person by the female protagonist herself, readers are introduced to Marian McAlpin, a recent college graduate, working for a

market research company, who lives with her roommate Ainsley, a radical feminist, and gets engaged to her boyfriend Peter. In the second part of the novel Marian gradually stops eating and establishes a relationship with an English graduate Duncan. Finally, in the third part, the shorter one, Marian regains her capacity to eat and breaks off the engagement with Peter, thus freeing herself.

At the beginning of the novel Marian's feelings and first signs of discomfort immediately show up in the first line: "I know I was all right on Friday when I got up; if anything I was feeling more stolid than usual"[4] (3). When reading this first sentence, readers immediately feel like asking themselves whether feeling "stolid" is really something positive. Actually feeling "stolid" means "feeling and showing little emotion or interest in anything, or (of a thing) not interesting or attractive"[5]. The narrator's choice of the adjective "stolid" already gives readers a hint of her passivity and delicate health, which will get worse throughout the novel. She – it will be soon revealed that the narrator is the protagonist Marian herself – seems to be doing things because others expect her to do so or because she thinks that this is the right way to act, not because she really wants to do or say something. She simply acts the way society and men want her to. Despite the negative meaning the adjective itself has, Marian actually seems to attribute a positive connotation to it. Probably her impassivity is her own way to cope with the difficulties of life and get through the day. Maybe trying not to express any emotion or to get involved in the daily situations of life is her own armor, aimed at protecting her from the dangerous and oppressing patriarchal society. She claims she was all

4 All quotes of *The Edible Woman* are taken from this edition: Atwood, Margaret. *The Edible Woman*. Virago Press, 2009.

5 This definition is taken from *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 1429.

right when she woke up that Friday morning, but the reader understands that she is no longer all right as the day evolves. At the beginning, when readers are introduced to Marian and her job, Marian's feelings of uncertainty towards her future, career and present working position are highly tangible. She keeps wondering whether she should aim for something higher and more satisfying. As Jennifer Hobgood claims in "Antiedibles: capitalism and schizophrenia in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*", the first phrase also conveys the great sense of paranoia that is haunting the protagonist since the beginning, a paranoia that will accompany Marian throughout most of the novel, as she continuously fears she has being eaten alive (n.p.). Although this is clearly unreal, just a hallucination, Marian is actually being symbolically consumed, oppressed and confined by people surrounding her, Peter in particular, and the society she lives in.

The second novel Atwood wrote, *Surfacing*, tells the story of an unnamed protagonist, whom readers will later discover being a woman, who undergoes a trip with her boyfriend Joe and her married friends Anna and David. This trip, which is taking the protagonist to a remote island in Quebec where she spent most of her childhood, is aimed at finding her missing father, whose disappearance was highly mysterious. Since the beginning it is easy to notice how difficult it is to fully enter the narrator's mind. She is very introverted and much of the book is composed of her own thoughts and observations. "I can't believe I'm on this road again"[6] (3) is how the book begins, which immediately gives readers a sense of uncertainty, which will turn into discomfort as the first chapters evolve, as if the protagonist was not in total control of her life and was just taken there instead of going willingly, which already conveys her passivity

6 All quotes of *Surfacing* are taken from this edition: Atwood, Margaret. *Surfacing*, Virago Press., 2009.

towards life. Just like Marian, the narrator of *Surfacing* probably needs to be passive and to function just as the recipient of other characters' needs and desires, in order to protect her own soul and feelings from the external world and prevent her bad memories from coming out. That is likely to be the reason why she does not allow herself to establish any close relationship with other people or clearly define her feelings for Joe. The fact the narrator is nameless certainly does not help the reader try to get an idea of the protagonist's character and mind. Just like *The Edible Woman*'s, the beginning of *Surfacing* sounds rather odd. Indeed both beginnings seem to be coming out of a dream, or, better, a nightmare, and to be surrounded by an oneiric atmosphere, as they both convey a certain feeling of confusion, thus leading the readers of both novels to ask themselves some questions: who are the narrators? What is actually happening? Why are they feeling this way? Has something bad happened?

The sense of uneasiness and discomfort found at the beginning of *Surfacing* is also probably due to the narrator's mention of the "disease spreading up from the south" (3). This "disease", readers will later discover, is Canada's closest neighbor, the United States of America and its invasion. At the beginning of the trip the protagonist, whom will be referred to as the "Surfacer"[7] from now on, finds it difficult to recognize the streets she used to drive across, as American tourism and consumerist culture have changed everything for commercial purposes: "'That's where the rockets are,' I say. Were. I don't correct it. David says "Bloody fascist pig Yanks,' as though he's commenting on the weather" (6). Americans are nothing more than "rotten capitalist bastards" (9) according to David, who harshly criticizes their groundless violence and culture. The symbol of American violence in the book is undoubtedly

7 This is how Bouson calls her in the third chapter "Cultural Feminism, Female Madness, and Rage in *Surfacing*" of *Brutal Choreographies*.

the heron, killed and hanged out of human greed, an animal whose senseless murder will haunt the protagonist throughout the whole novel. The protagonist notices how the whole landscape has changed since she used to come with her family because of American consumerist culture:

> We come to the gas station where the woman said to turn left and David groans with joy, 'Oh god look at that,' . . . What they're after is the three stuffed moose on a platform near the pumps: they're dressed in human clothes and wired standing up on their hind legs, a father moose with a trench-coat and a pipe in his mouth, a mother moose in a print dress and flowered hat and a little boy moose in hort pants, a striped jersey and a baseball cap, waving an American flag. . . . The new road is paved and straight, two lanes with a line down the middle. Already it's beginning to gather landmarks, a few advertisement signs, a roadside crucifix with a wooden Christ, ribs sticking out, the alien god, mysterious to me as ever. Underneath it are a couple of jam jars with flowers, daisies and red devil's paintbrush and the white ones you can dry, Indian Posies, Everlasting, there must have been a car accident. At intervals the old road crosses us; it was dirt, full of bumps and potholes, it followed the way the land went, up and down the hills and around the cliffs and boulders. (11, 12)

This quote about the surrounding landscape clearly shows how the narrator must feel when confronted with a place she thought she knew and was supposed to know, but she does not anymore. The "strangling feeling" (19) of anxiety and confusion she is struck by when not recognizing her childhood places is summarized by a short quote: "Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory" (9). Feelings of uncertainty and discomfort are to be found at the beginning of the two novels in both protagonists and readers as well, as they cannot really understand what is happening inside the characters' minds. When starting reading *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, readers could find themselves asking an uncomfortable question: how can we believe, trust and fully put ourselves in the hands of two apparently self-conscious and insecure narrators, if one, already at the beginning, is feeling no longer all right and "more stolid than usual" and the other one does not even believe in what she is doing? Both narrators

do not appear as reliable as readers would expect them to be, and the case of *Surfacing* is even odder, since the protagonist, as the novel evolves, is revealed to be misreporting and under-reporting some facts. Much of the information readers find out throughout *Surfacing* are perceived without the direct intervention of the narrator (for example, the Surfacer never mentions the fact that Joe is her boyfriend).

Throughout the two novels the two female protagonists, who both live in a phallocentric society, spend the whole time trying to find their own place in the world and attempting to make room for women like them in a strictly patriarchal world. Their long-lasting search for an identity of their own is undoubtedly influenced by the other female characters present in the story. But as these female options provided by the story do not seem to be suitable for the two protagonists, their journey towards self-discovery is more difficult than it could be as they need to learn how to find their own way by avoiding already established prototypes of femininity and find and establish their own. The core of the two novels displays the protagonists' attempt to find their voice and identity, which is undermined by several elements that prevent them from achieving their main goal.

One of the most significant factors, which makes it more difficult for the two women to reach their goal is the social context they live in. In the case of *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* the strictly patriarchal world of the 1950s and 1960s is highly relevant, as it can provide greater insight into the story of Marian and the Surfacer. Indeed some characters present in both novels seem to embody the unwritten social norms and restrictions that were the status quo in those years. When analyzing the two stories as firmly located within the context of the 1950s and 1960s in America, readers notice that the threat of strict gender roles,

together with the division of labor between sexes, is present in both of them. In *Surfacing* when the four friends get to the cabin on the remote island, it is soon apparent that women are confined to the domestic sphere as they do the cleaning and cooking, while men just relax or do what was, and somewhere still is, considered to be only manly activities:

> In the morning David fished from the dock, catching nothing; Anna read, she was on her fourth or fifth paperback. I swept the floor, the broom webbing itself with long threads, dark and light, from where Anna and I brushed our hair in front of the mirror; then I tried to work. Joe stayed on the wall bench, arms wrapped around his knees in lawn-dwarf position, watching me. (106)

Throughout the novel there are some hints concerning the social and economical background, sometimes in the form of apparently little insignificant details, which, nonetheless, contribute to better define the context in which the two stories are taking place. When the protagonist is visiting Paul, her father's kind and trusty friend, and his wife Madame, she notices their electric stove, "a blue ceramic Madonna with pink child hanging above it" (20). Just like Kalpakli points out in her "Exploitation of Women and Nature in Surfacing," the figure of the "Madonna" is highly significant when reading this novel, especially in relation to the social background of it (790). In a phallocentric and patriarchal world ruled by misogynistic and sexist norms, the figure of the Madonna has always functioned as a role model for women: females need to be mothers, because that is the role nature has assigned to them, but they also have to be virgins, meaning that they need to be prude, have a high sense of morality and be sexually and emotionally contained, because the role of sexual predator belongs to the man. Motherhood, as well as marriage, has indeed been always used as a tool to contain, limit and confine women to the domestic environment. According to society women cannot escape maternity, because their task in life is to provide the world with newborns, thus

performing their assigned social duty. Society does not consider motherhood as a personal ambition or desire, but as something women must have in their DNA and must pursue.

Not only is labor gender-biased, but so are also the toys the protagonist and her brother used to play with during their childhood. When the Surfacer finds old scrapbooks on the shelf upon the bed and begins to flick through one of them, she notices it is her brother's. There were

> explosions in red and orange, soldiers dismembering in the air, planes and tanks; he must have been going to school by then, he knew enough to draw little swastikas on the sides. Further on there were flying men with comic-book capes and explorers on another planet, he spent hours explaining these pictures to me. The purple jungles I'd forgotten, the green sun with seven red moons, the animals with scales and spines and tentacles; and a man-eating plant, engulfing a careless victim, a balloon with HELP in it squeezing out of his mouth like bubble gum. The other explorers were rescuing him with their weapons: flame-throwers, trumpet-shaped pistols, ray-guns. In the background was their spaceship, bristling with gadgets. (114, 115)

Reading her brother's old scrapbook, readers can easily get that what is described ("explosions . . ., soldiers . . . planes and tanks; . . .") is something that commonly belongs to the male world and which, not coincidentally, has something to do with destruction and death. According to ecofeminism women are more sensitive towards nature as they have a special connection to it and, consequently, dedicate a special care to the natural elements surrounding them, because they, women and nature, have something in common: they are both victimized by men. The narrator possesses the typical feminine sensitivity towards nature and finds herself totally in contrast with the act of industrialization, as it is visible at the beginning of the book, when she harshly criticizes American tourism and consumerist culture. She refuses any kind of violence, especially the one done out of greed, which is typical of the man. When she is presented with the choice of killing animals to eat them, she refuses: "Thud of metal on

fishbone, skull, neckless headbody, the fish is whole, I couldn't any more, I had no right to. We didn't need it, our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure" (153). Women's attitude towards nature is highly in contrast with men's, who tend to destroy and hurt the natural environment, women included; for example the Surfacer's brother used to trap insects in bottles, which she, as a woman, felt the need to free, David goes hunting and American men kill animals in the forest only for the sake of it (Kalpakli 792 – 793).

When she begins to flick through her own scrapbook, she notices "there were no drawings at all, just illustrations cut from magazines and pasted in. They were ladies, all kinds: holding up cans of cleanser, knitting, smiling, modeling toeless high heels and nylons with dark seams and pillbox hats and veils" (115). While looking at the pictures in her scrapbook, she recalls that everything a woman wished to become once grown up was "'A lady'" or "'A mother'" (115) and the narrator was not free of these thoughts either. This is what happens inside the mind of most little girls. They are so often exposed to and bombarded with images of flawless women displayed on magazines or, more recently, television, that they cannot think lucidly and rationally and realize none of those pictures are actually real. After the failure of her first "marriage" the narrator of *Surfacing*, whose mind was molded by society in a way that she thought she had to pursue her social duty of becoming a wife and a mother, gradually begins her path towards rebellion, starts resisting what she once thought was a woman's destiny and losing trust in the word "love." Through the disillusion of the protagonist Atwood tries to unravel the notion of "the romantic fantasy of marriage as a blissful union of opposites or complements" by replacing it "with a condemning picture of marriage as sexual

manipulation and warfare" (Bouson, "Brutal Choreographies" 43), thus showing that marriage does not necessarily equal love and respect.

As can and will be seen, *Surfacing* is set in such a misogynistic and patriarchal world, that women need to change according to masculine desires and are supposed to adapt to what society expects from them. But the social context in *The Edible Woman* proves to be equally uncomfortable and socially constraining for women (suffice it to say that Ainsley turns into a person she is not, a subservient woman, to attract Len's attention). In *The Edible Woman* the highly sexist and misogynistic society is signaled by many factors and the one which stands out at the beginning is the female protagonist's job at Seymour Surveys, a survey research firm. Marian's alienating and dead-end job consists in revising market survey questionnaires and undoubtedly provides an element that prevents her from finding her own identity. At the beginning of the novel she asks herself: "What could I expect to turn into at Seymour Surveys?" (14). "No one really significant" is the answer readers may give, once they get to know Marian's working environment. This male dominated business she works for makes it difficult for her to foresee any satisfying or rewarding career advancement in the future. She feels stuck at her office, which is significantly located on the floor between the "men upstairs" (13) (all executives and psychologists) and the lower floor where the machines are:

> The company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle. On the floor above are the executives and the psychologists – referred to as the men upstairs, since they are all men . . . . Below us are the machines – mimeo machines, I.B.M. machines for counting and sorting and tabulating the information; . . . Our department is the link between the two: we are supposed to take care of the human element, the interviewers themselves. (13)

The fact women are the mediator between men and machines could mean that women are more human than machines, but not as much valuable as men, who occupy a higher position, both literally, economically and socially. Marian's initial uneasiness and discomfort, which is well tangible at the very beginning of the novel, turns into nervousness, which will lead the way to the escalating anxiety and soon-to-come psychosis, when she is presented with the pension plan she needs to sign:

> I was suddenly quite depressed; it bothered me more than it should have. [...] It was a kind of superstitious panic about the fact that I had actually signed my name, had put my signature to a magic document which seemed to bind me to a future so far ahead I couldn't think about it. Somewhere in front of me was a self waiting, pre-formed, a self who had worked during innumerable years for Seymour Surveys and was now receiving her reward. A pension. I foresaw a bleak room with a plug-in electric heater. [...] I thought of my signature going into a file and the file going into a cabinet and the cabinet being shut away in a vault somewhere and locked. (15, 16)

When she signs the obligatory pension plan, she feels even more stuck, manipulated and unable to change the course of her life. She is now trapped and has no way out. As many women during the 1950s and 1960s, Marian keeps contemplating her position within the company and thinks she could and should aspire to much more, but the business, and society itself, does not give her any means to progress professionally speaking. After such a tiring and overwhelming day which consisted of her signature on the terrifying "magic document" (15) and acquaintance with Ainsley's evil plan aimed at exploiting Len for her own purpose, Marian begins "to feel fuzzy in the brain" and goes "into bed, feeling unsettled" (45).

In the early 1960s Margaret Atwood worked for Canadian Facts Marketing in Toronto, a survey research firm, basically performing the same activities as Marian's. She used to fact-check and edit the questionnaires of the survey. Undoubtedly the creation and description of

Marian's job at Seymour Survey draws considerably on Atwood's working experience in Toronto. At Canadian Facts, just like in the novel, the offices of men were located at a higher level than the women's. Most significantly when Atwood started working for the survey research firm, she was already aware of the difficulties women had to go through when entering the labor market, and became even more conscious of it, witnessing the challenges many of her coworkers had to face everyday at work. (Cooke 49 – 51)

The commercial world is pictured as pointless, non-sensical and deceptive. Marian is currently working on a campaign for Moose Beer, which aims at telling the consumers, mostly men, that "any real man, on a real man's holiday – hunting, fishing, or just plain old-fashioned relaxing – needs a beer with a healthy, hearty yasye, a deep-down manly favor" (23). Obviously this is mere empty commercial language, as none of what is announced by the speaking voice is true, but it is only a way to catch the customer's attention, thus convincing him to buy the beer. This advertisement undoubtedly fools its consumers, making them believe that only by drinking their beer they can be "real men" and fulfill their assigned role in society. Indeed the figure of the "real man" or, more specifically, of the "macho man" is the most common stereotypical role assigned to men, who are usually defined by their "manliness", strength or muscles and aggressiveness. As can be seen, restricting gender roles seem to confine and hurt men as well as women. Marian claims that, thanks to this ad, "the average beer-drinker, the slope-shouldered pot-bellied kind, would be able to feel a mystical identity" (23). Reading these lines about the advertising world, readers can get how deceptive and tricky it is towards the customers, because it monopolizes them, making empty and false promises. As Lilburn states, it remains uncertain whether this commercial "is celebrating the image of the

‘real man’ or constructing it” (13), thus reinforcing in both cases, the rather false dichotomy of the gender roles.

Towards the middle of the book Marian takes the bus to go to the laundromat and, while riding, she spends her time looking at commercial posters. The one she is looking at pictures a woman “skipping about in her girdle” (111). The ad is clearly a way to tell women what they should look like or wear and, in doing this, it gives an unrealistic picture of what is normal, thus imposing impossible standards for women to reach, which makes readers, and Marian throughout the book, question the morality of the commercial world and the notion of normality (Lilburn 37). Although she keeps contemplating her position within the company and feels trapped once she signed the pension plan, at the beginning Marian silences herself and refuses to resist the unmoral principles of her job. But slowly she realizes how empty and tricky the world of advertising is and the readers get the reason why the commercial world is so relevant in the book, as it mirrors the way society deceives women’s expectations and aspirations, manipulating them into believing all they need is a man, a house and children.

The relationship between the protagonist of *Surfacing* and her parents, especially her father, is rather complicated. The father, who just like Atwood’s was an entomologist, a “voluntary recluse” (8), used to spend most of his time in the bushes and taught his daughter everything about nature and survival in the Canadian wilderness. “Even the village had too many people for him” (71), claims the narrator. Probably, he used to be considered very powerful by the other villagers and his daughter especially. “Why is the road different, he shouldn't have allowed them to do it” (10), claims the narrator, blaming her father for not having prevented all these changes from happening. She is furious with her parents also

because they “decided it was time to leave and they left, they set up this barrier. They didn't consider how [she] would feel, who would take care of [her]” (223). Although probably benevolently, the father ostracized and excluded his daughter from society and her peers, confining her to the bushes, thus leading her to experience social alienation when still a child and removing love and warmth from her life (Takhur 212). The social alienation she experienced as a child is something she will carry with her later in her life, as she will always feel unable to communicate and establish any close relationship with people. The father is one of the several male figures in the novel, who controls and tells the protagonist how to behave and what to do, leading to a gradual disintegration of her identity. As a child she was victim of apparently pointless restrictions. “I was so shut off from them [the villagers]. . . . Although we played during visits with the solemn, slightly hostile children of Paul and Madame, the games were brief and wordless,” she recalls (65). The Surfacer and her brother were not allowed to “sneak up and peer through the windows [of the Church]” (66), since their parents were atheist. In short, the father, holding on to the Enlightenment values such as reason and logic, personifies the notion of “the privileging of masculinity as the site of power and knowledge” (Bouson, “Brutal Choreographies” 52), which Atwood is trying to challenge and reverse through the writing of *Surfacing*. Indeed, the father’s gifts – “the guides, the man-animals and the maze of numbers” (191) – are not enough to protect the narrator: “it [her father’s intercession] gave only knowledge and there were more gods than his, his were the gods of the head” (195), she claims. She also needs the legacy left by her mother, who, as we will see later, embodies nature and speaks the language of the heart in contrast to her husband, who represents the head. It is precisely her mother’s gift, a picture depicting “a woman with a round

moon stomach" (202), which will make her powerful again, giving her the chance to come to terms with the loss of her baby and replace it with a new one.

It could be argued that the reason why her parents, and especially her father, denied her any interaction with the world was only to protect her soul from any external bad source, that could possibly hurt her. But is this the right way to raise a child, that someday will have to walk the path on her own? The reader gets hints concerning the complicated and distant relationship between parents and daughter throughout the whole book. In chapter one, for example, the Surfacer recalls her father's driving:

> They used to go over it as fast as possible, their father knew every inch of it and could take it (he said) blindfolded, which was what they often seemed to be doing, grinding up past the signs that said PETITE VITESSE and plunging down over the elevator edges and scraping around the rockfaces, GARDEZ LE DROIT, horn hooting; the rest of them clamped onto the inside of the car, getting sicker and sicker despite the Lifesavers their mother would hand out, and finally throwing up groggily by the side of the road, blue asters and pink fireweed, if he could stop in time or out the car window if he couldn't or into paper bags, he anticipated emergencies, if he was in a hurry and didn't want to stop at all. (12)

By referring to her father, mother and brother as "they" and to herself in third person, she is clearly distancing herself from them, "as if they were somebody else's family" (13). As the novel unfolds, readers understand that what really worsened their relationship was the fact that "they never forgave [her]" (32) for having divorced and, especially, for having left her child, whom she never considered her own. That is why at a certain point in the book she realizes that, in case her father was still alive, she would not like to meet him again because "there's no point" (32). However, as we will see later in the next chapter, she will eventually realize that meeting her parents is an integral part of the process of recovery.

The Surfacer's mental breakdown, which will be discussed in the next chapter, could be also seen, among many other things, as a consequence of her strict upbringing which made her weaker, more vulnerable and likely to break down when confronted with other people or outer events to which she was not used, having lived for such a long time confined to the bushes. Her father's mistreatment and her forced confinement could be one of the causes of her social and emotional underdevelopment, which is tangible since the beginning. Significantly at a certain point she claims that "being socially retarded is like being mentally retarded" (89), comparing social alienation to mental illness, thus apparently maintaining that the social isolation she used to suffer in her childhood could be one of the early causes of her mental breakdown.

The social and political pressures society and men pose on women are so resistant and well rooted, that they start devouring the protagonists of both *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* since the very beginning. In both novels the most present female characters do not provide a good influence on the protagonists during their journey towards self-realization and self-fulfillment. Among Marian's colleagues at work the "office virgins", this is how Ainsley calls them, stand out:

> They aren't really very much alike, except that they are all artificial blondes – Emmy, the typist, whisk-tinted and straggly; Lucy, who has a kind of public-relations job, platinum and elegantly coiffured, and Millie, Mrs. Bogue's Australian assistant, . . . all virgins – Millie from a solid girl-guide practicality ('I think in the long run it's better to wait until you're married, don't you? Less bother.'), Lucy from social quailing ('What would people say?') . . . and Emmy, who is the office hypochondriac, from the belief that it would make her sick, which it probably would. (16)

The three office virgins working alongside Marian seem to believe in old fashioned and traditional values. They care about marriage and, especially, virginity: Millie wants to wait

until marriage, because it is less bother, Lucy is scared of what others would say and Emmy fears that she could get sick. As already noted, marriage and sex were only two of the expedients society used to limit women's freedom. By the 1950s and 1960s, when *The Edible Woman* is set, many women, encouraged by society's expectations, went to college only to find a husband, as it was considered weird for a woman not to be married in her 20s. Of course pre-marital sex was considered absolutely sinful, especially if it was women who performed it. Considering the context in which *The Edible Woman* is set is really important when approaching the characterization of the three office virgins. By reading these lines, we get the impression that the they are worried about what other people think or would think about them, which makes it clear that Millie, Lucy and Emmy are all victims of societal pressures and expectations. In short, they all embody the stereotypical image of the woman of the 1950s and early 1960s, waiting for a man to marry, thus giving up her own needs and desires.

As young women fully trapped in the victim role, they seem to be manipulating Marian into a slave to society. Emmy, Lucy and Millie, waiting for the right man to save them, do not question preexisting ideas or established institutions like marriage, which, according to them, will eventually be part of every woman's life and provide fulfillment: "After they have traveled enough they would like to get married and settle down" (16). At the beginning Marian, when still completely immersed in her role as victim, is expected to think the same. Ainsley, despite being a liberated feminist rebelling against patriarchy, does not offer a good model for the protagonist either because, first of all, Marian does not morally accept Ainsley's evil plan to subjugate Len for her own purposes, and secondly Ainsley, the most anti-marriage woman in the book, by getting married with Fischer (Duncan's roommate), eventually seems to get rid of

all her liberal and "feminist" beliefs, which she used to hold on to so stubbornly. Moreover, at the end of the novel, as Ainsley sees the cake Marian has baked for Peter, she tells her she is "rejecting [her] femininity" (345), thus accepting the notion of femininity society wants women to embrace, which she had been disgusted with all along. The last two female characters present in the book and not mentioned so far, the Landlady and her little daughter, are no exception. The older woman does not approve of alcohol and imposes strict rules on tenants, checks on every visitor and tries to control Marian and Ainsley's life and actions, especially when the latter involve male visitors coming into the two girls' apartment. All she does, she claims, is mainly to protect the innocence of her own child. The Landlady is very prude, believes in old-fashioned values, checks on women and, just like society itself, judges them on the basis of appearance. As she tries to enforce absurd rules, which socially constrain females, she insists that "the district [isn't] as good as it used to be" (8).

What the office virgins seem to care so much about, marriage**,** is actually what, more than anything else, constitutes a trap for women in both novels. *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, indeed, aim to unravel the narrative of the "traditional romance plot" (Bouson, "Brutal Choreographies" 40) mainly through the depiction of the two female characters and their rebellion. The author's attempt to portray marriage not as a happy union between two people loving each other, but as a death trap for women is evident in the Surfacer's description of her previous wedding: "At my wedding we filled our forms, name, age, birthplace, blood type. We had it in a post office, a J. P. did it" (111). Soon after the ceremony confetti is blown up and the weather is sunny, nonetheless she recalls the smell of "glue and humid socks and the odour of second-day blouse and crystallized deodorant from the irritated secretary, and, from

another doorway, the chill of antiseptic" and her husband's reaction, "It is over . . . feel better?", which makes the atmosphere at once even bleaker and weirder (111). The Surfacer, feeling uncomfortable, thinks that "he was talking to [her] as though [she] was an invalid, not a bride" (112). The way she recalls the ceremony is rather disturbing and awkward, as it surely does not resemble a typical wedding day at all. Although the readers may find it uncomfortable to read these lines, they will not be given a full explanation of what has really happened until the second half of the book. In *The Edible Woman* Marian is aware, as she heard that one female typist was fired shortly after she had begun to work at Seymour Surveys, that Mrs Bogue, Marian's department head at the office, prefers her employees to be either unmarried or not planning to become pregnant soon, which clearly conveys that marriage and pregnancy in a patriarchal society harm women, especially in the working environment. Although Mrs Bogue represents the liberated strong professional woman, who shouts to male executives that they "'re working with humans, not with machines" (202), she has internalized some norms rooted in the patriarchal world, as she claims that "newly-weds, she had been heard to say, were inclined to be unstable" (168).

As a woman, at the beginning of the book Marian is very weak and fragile and, consequently, very easy to manipulate. Basically, almost all the characters in the book, except maybe for Duncan, the English graduate student with whom Marian will hang out throughout the novel, try to model Marian and turn her into what society expects her to be. Her parents have a clear idea in mind of the kind of woman their daughter must not turn into:

> Their reaction . . . was less elated glee than a quiet, rather smug satisfaction, as though their fears about the effects of her university education . . . had been calmed at last. They had probably been worried she would turn into a high-school teacher or a maiden aunt or a dope

> addict or a female executive, or that she would undergo some shocking physical transformation . . . (215)

Another female character who does not function as a good role model for Marian just like the office virgins and Ainsley is Clara, Marian's old friend, constantly pregnant, who married Joe and consequently had to drop out of high school, thus leaving her ambitions aside. When Marian visits her fragile friend Clara, who seems to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and her husband Joe, Clara is pregnant with her third child and the whole fussy domestic environment seems to overwhelm the protagonist, who feels like a "blotter . . . absorbing a little boredom" (31). Although Marian, as a woman, has been taught since she was little that pregnancy, domesticity and children will eventually be part of every woman's life and despite the fact this is what most women look for in their life, the whole scene makes her sick. According to Marian Clara's pregnancy made her look like "a boa constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon" (30). Despite having internalized social and gender norms, deep inside her heart, as she feels sick watching Clara's mental and physical fatigue, Marian starts questioning the morality and rightness of these norms, which seem to regulate and define women. That is why she feels awkward when looking at Clara's messy and, questionably, "normal" life. In short, by telling Marian that pregnancy was "really marvellous . . . sort of fascinating" (156), although actually it was not, and by celebrating "women's biological destiny" (Howells, "Margaret Atwood" 44), Clara seems to be reflecting society's expectations about women. The words seem to be coming out mechanically from her mouth, as if what she is saying was actually what she has been taught all along to think, rather than what she would really want to say. When Marian visits Clara, Atwood portrays a scene of "suburban squalor, with not-yet-toilet-trained children and all the detritus of a badly run household" (Keith 47),

providing a very bleak image of maternity and motherhood. Although she cannot help but waiting for her married life to come, probably Marian knows inside her heart that this female constriction she witnesses at Clara's house is totally wrong and as the novel progresses she becomes more and more aware of that, thus understanding what actually made her sick that day and fully grasping the meaning of her mental and eating disorder once for all. From this description of Clara readers can see clearly that Marian occupies a mid-position within the book: she is neither the feminist and morally liberated Ainsley, who decides to have an illegitimate child with Len without being married and challenges society's view of women merely as wives and mothers ("How is the society ever going to change if some individuals in it don't lead the way?" [44]), nor the loving and dedicated mother Clara, who believes in traditional values, such as motherhood (of course readers may ask themselves how far Clara really believes in these values). Although Marian is not as conventional as Clara, throughout the novel she is modeled according to society's unwritten rules and adjusts herself to other people's desires and expectations or to traditional gender roles, rather than taking her own decisions.

Just like Marian is forced to make a strong effort to find her own identity among such stereotypical and traditional female characters, the Surfacer is destined to do the same. The only female character that is recurrent in the book apart from the protagonist is Anna. Through the story of the protagonist and the depiction of Anna's marriage to David, *Surfacing* unravels and disrupts the notion of marriage as a union made of mutual love and respect, which is usually to be found in many novels of the 19th and 20th century. Since the beginning of the book Anna appears silent, impassible and passive, but rather happy and seems to cherish her

marriage with David. Actually the narrator informs the readers that Anna is "desperate . . . fighting for her life. . . because if she ever surrendered, the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere. To continue the war" (196). Anna actually cannot stand David's violent attitude, his humiliating behavior towards her and his sexist and offensive jokes, which led her to partially hate him. When David forces Anna to take her clothes off so that he could keep shooting his film *Random Samples*, the narrator acknowledges his power to manipulate and compel women masked by kindness: "I recognized that menacing gentleness, at school it always went before the trick, the punchline" (172). He continuously tells Anna about his affairs with other women, proving he can do whatever he wants and that she has not power over him. He claims he supports women's equality, but concludes that Anna "just doesn't happen to be equal" (176). David is demanding, highly manipulative and cruel; he even tries to rape the protagonist, who luckily can resist him. He has set a certain amount of rules for Anna to follow and she silently complies to them, because she is afraid he could get mad. One of them is that she must always wear make-up. Probably Anna, just like many women in the 1950s and 1960s, was afraid that if he should leave her, she would not find another man to marry, thus ending up a spinster, a status which girls did not aspire to, as it caused severe discrimination at that time. Just like Peter in *The Edible Woman* claims, "people who aren't married get funny in middle age" (124), thus showing how men contribute to upholding the values patriarchy spreads and to which women need to conform. When Anna accidentally breaks one of David's rules, she admits that she gets punished. She confesses it is not easy to follow her husband's rules because "he keeps changing them so [she's] never sure" and argues that "he likes to make [her]

cry because he can't do it himself" (156). Despite everything she goes through on a daily basis, Anna is not able to rationalize her husband's behavior and leave him once and for all.

In chapter five the narrator and Anna have a highly interesting conversation about marriage, which is quite revealing. The Surfacer wonders how Anna can manage all the stress and difficulties of being married with David and she argues that women have "to make an emotional commitment" and "to let go" (56). Anna replies as if she was talking "to an invisible microphone suspended above her head: people's voices go radio when they give advice." (56) The way she replies makes readers wonder whether she is telling the narrator what she really thinks or not, as her voice sounds as if it was a recorded or automatic voice on the radio. The impression is that she is repeating what society has been teaching her all along. The idea women have to let go of their own life, aspirations, ambitions and identity in favor of their husband and need to make a commitment is something society has tried to inculcate in girls' young minds for centuries. The Surfacer does not understand the ease with which Anna describes her marriage and starts thinking about her own: "Maybe that was why I failed, because I didn't know what I had to let go of. For me it hadn't been like skiing, it was more like jumping off a cliff. That was the feeling I had all the time I was married; in the air, going down, waiting for the smash at the bottom" (57). In short, Anna, displayed as (sexual) object, undoubtedly does not represent a good outcome for the protagonist. But if in *The Edible Woman* Marian cannot rely on any female character to help her through her journey towards self-discovery, in *Surfacing* the protagonist can count on her mother as the one and only female figure who has had a good influence on her, despite being dead from the beginning. Her mother was a truly genuine, selfless and resilient woman, who fought harshly throughout her life

against cancer. Her father “explained everything” but her “mother never did, which only convinced [her, the protagonist] that she had the answers but wouldn't tell” (91), she used to “omit . . . the pain and isolation and whatever it was she was fighting against, something in a vanished history.” (247) In spite of the fact the mother did not express any emotion and tended not to talk about all the pain in her life, she has played a significant role in her own daughter’s search for identity and, more specifically, she handed down her love for and strong relationship with nature to her daughter.

As already noted, marriage is one element which constrains and limits women. Although the two protagonists of *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* are not married, their relationship with men are equally dangerous and prevent them from leading a healthy life. Relationships in both novels lack love, empathy and emotion. They seem to be based on habit, rather than on love and appear to be going nowhere, as both participants are not emotionally involved with each other at all. Marriage, which is something Marian and the Surfacer get very close to experiencing but eventually do not, risks to relegate them to the feminine environment *par excellence*: the house. By getting married women are deprived and forced to get rid of their own ambitions and identity in favor of the man they choose to have by their side forever. In both novels what the two protagonists risk by marrying the men they think they love and are loved by in return, is losing their own identity and personality, being overwhelmed by their husbands’ expectations and needs, that they, as wives, should fulfill. The narrator of *Surfacing* soon claims, “I’d proved my normality” (62) when talking about her first marriage, as at that time being married was the only option for women. Becoming a spinster was an absolute tragedy and women risked being ostracized if not married. But later in the novel both female

protagonists realize marriage is nothing but a trap. The Surfacer, once having partially realized what marriage actually means and having lost trust in love, claims, “I still don’t see why signing a name should make any difference” (46), maintaining that she does not believe in the magic of the union between a man and a woman anymore. As marriage seems to deprive women of their individuality, both *Surfacing* and *The Edible Woman* try to give a bleaker and more realistic view of how relationships between women and men work and to show how often the latter are made of exploitation and manipulation.

In *The Edible Woman* Marian is victim of her overpowering and monopolizing boyfriend, and later fiancé, Peter. Peter is a lawyer, whose social status is “rising . . . like a balloon” (64) and seems to be so much involved in his business, that he does not even care about her fiancée’s health. He confesses that he chose Marian because she is “the kind of girl who wouldn’t try to take over his life” (70) and a “sensible girl”, which is “the first thing to look for when it comes to choosing a wife” (106). Peter is really confident and controlling towards Marian, whom he tries to change according to society’s standards of femininity. Marian and Peter’s relationship seems to be based on everything but love. When Peter proposes, he does that not because he loves her, but because “it’ll be a lot better in the long run for [his] [law] practice” (106) and, indeed, the word “love” is basically never to be found in the book when it comes to the couple. When Marian asks Peter whether he loves her or not, he claims: “Of course I love you… I’m going to marry you, aren’t I? And I love you especially in that red dress” (290), which does not sound like a love declaration at all. The morning after Peter’s proposal Marian wakes up feeling her mind “as empty as though someone has scooped out inside of [her] skull like a cantaloupe . . .” (99), which is not the typical reaction one has

after a marriage proposal. She keeps thinking about it the following days, wondering whether she made the right choice. The point is that she did not make any choice at all, but she has just been passive all the time: “She had fallen into the habit in the last month or so of letting him choose for her” (179, 180). She has simply passively accepted her condition as Peter’s wife. In the final chapter, before she goes back to “normal”, she decides she made the right choice because she has always thought that one day eventually she should get married. Marian’s life, once again, is made up of adjustments and acceptance. She will also think of her marriage to Peter as a business transaction, claiming that she and Peter will “set up a very reasonable arrangement” (124), where the word love is once again missing. While talking with Ainsley, who does not agree with Marian’s marriage to Peter, Marian also claims that probably, subconsciously, she had wanted to marry him all along. During the lovemaking in the bathtub, which was forced upon her, she associates the sexual act with death, thus suggesting that marrying Peter is like dying (Keith 36). Throughout the novel her conviction that she has been lucky to find such “an ordinariness raised to perfection” (69) slowly begins to fade away, especially when she overhears a conversation between her fiancé and Len (Ainsley’s sexual prey), which makes her feel rather uncomfortable:

> I attuned myself to Peter’s voice; it sounded as though it was coming from a distance. He was telling Len a story, which seemed to be about hunting. I knew Peter used to go hunting, especially with his group of old friends, but he had never told me much about it. He had said once that they never killed anything but crows, groundhogs and other small vermin. ‘So I let her off and Wham. One shot, right through the heart. The rest of them got away. I picked it up and Trigger said, ‘You know how to gut them, you just slit her down the belly and give her a good hard shake and all the guts’ll fall out.’ So I whipped out my knife, good knife, German steel, and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack, like a whip you see, and the next thing you know there was blood and guts all over the place. All over me, what a

> mess, rabbit guts dangling from the trees, god the trees were red for yards . . .' (79, 80)

While overhearing this conversation Marian starts questioning Peter's morality and is shocked by his storytelling about hunting but, above all, she is shocked by the way he tells. He seems to be enjoying recalling the episode when he slaughtered a rabbit. She cannot recognize her beloved anymore as he now appears cruel and beast-like. Willing to "hear his normal voice" (80) again, she starts crying. The question that automatically comes to mind is whether he has been this cruel all along. Undoubtedly in the book there are several episodes which point out that the relationship between Marian and Peter is totally unhealthy. Marian has lived her whole life trying to adjust to other people's, especially Peter's, moods. At the beginning of the book Peter seems to be depressed because one friend of him, Trigger, is getting married. The marriages of Peter's friends had always upset Peter and Trigger's was no exception. Although reluctantly Marian makes love with Peter in the bathtub. She feels very uncomfortable, but does not say anything because she feels sorry for his boyfriend and wants to relieve his distress. In this same chapter Marian describes a dream she had, in which she was witnessing her body dissolving. This scene is quite revealing, as it mirrors her real fear about a possible dissolution of her. It is not only a fear or hallucination because, symbolically, her personality is really dissipating: she is uncertain about her future, she feels unable to change it and, consequently, she feels she has no fixed identity anymore. (Lilburn 19 – 22)

Peter's monopolizing and demanding nature emerges particularly during the organization of the party he has decided to throw. Before the party actually begins, he tries to turn Marian into the "perfect woman", reducing her to a mere luxurious object he wants to expose and show others. Marian reluctantly buys a new dress and gets her hair done at a salon,

but she does not like her new look at all, because she cannot recognize herself, feeling artificial and unnatural, but decides to accepts her new appearance to please her fiancé. When he sees the "new" Marian, he significantly says "yum yum" (286), the typical sound indicating someone who is eating, that points out to the intensity with which Peter is consuming Marian, thus leading to her dissolution. Peter tells her fiancée that she looks really beautiful, which implicitly means that she should look this artificial more often. The scene where Peter tries to immortalize Marian with his camera is even more significant. The protagonist is reluctant to pose for him but, once more, she complies with his request. Peter ironically tells her to "look natural" (291) but, obviously, she cannot. She feels very uncomfortable in that position, waiting for him to take a picture of her, and she wants to tell him to stop but "her body had frozen, gone rigid" (291). The shot is interrupted by a knock on the door and Marian is relieved but nervous at the same time, because she cannot understand what is wrong with her attitude. "It's only a camera" (291) she says, trying to reassure herself. Despite Marian's extreme passivity towards other people and the events happening in her life, deep down inside she knows she should not accept and adhere to society's unwritten rules and let someone else define or transform her without her consent. The camera used by Peter to immortalize and symbolically trap Marian and the camera with which David, forcing Anna to strip off her clothes, shoots his movie have the same function: they both represent male power and domination over women, who are being controlled and manipulated.

Men in *Surfacing* are no less monopolizing and controlling. The protagonist of the novel has had two relationships in her life, at least this is what readers know from the book, and both of them seem rather problematic. Her first man, she tells her readers, is her ex-

husband who has taken custody of their only child. But as the story develops, the truth starts unraveling. Her ex-husband was actually her married art professor, whom she had an affair with, and who got her pregnant, but forced her into having an abortion. She made up a new story which replaced the real one, in order to suppress the haunting memory of the abortion, that she had been trying to forget ever since. Her lover's rather demanding attitude is evident, while she is talking about the chance of taking her child to her childhood places:

> But I couldn't have brought the child here, I never identified it as mine; I didn't name it before it was born even, the way you're supposed to. It was my husband's, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was no more use. I couldn't prove it though, he was clever: he kept saying he loved me. (38)

As in the union between Marian and Peter it is almost impossible to find the word "love" in the relationship between the Surfacer and her fake husband. He exploited her sexually, making her feel "like an incubator", and eventually forced her to abort their child. As their relationship evolved, she became aware of his overpowering nature and finally recognized that he "began to expect things and wanted to be pleased" (46). Her relationship with her art professor, whose love declaration was false and empty according to the protagonist, has made her reluctant to "trust that word ['love'] again" (56). Their relationship, as well as Marian and Peter's, seems to be based on passive acceptance rather than love and, just like Marian, the narrator of *Surfacing* suffered several humiliations during her first relationship especially because of her career ambitions. The Surfacer works as "a commercial artist, or, when the job is more pretentious, an illustrator" (62) but, while dating her art professor, his conviction that her aspiration to become a "real artist . . . was cute but misguided" (63) made her change her

mind. According to him she "should study something [she]' d be able to use because there have never been any important woman artists" (63). She thought he was not all that wrong and thus refused to follow her own aspirations and "went into Design and did fabric patterns" (63). Her past relationship with her fake husband made the protagonist determined not to let anyone else control and monopolize her. Her strong resolution will pave the way for her psychological transformation and final recovery. It could be said that, while Marian's oppression from the male counterparts and status of a victim coincides with the beginning and first part of the novel, in *Surfacing* the female protagonist undergoes the same phase mostly before the story actually takes place in the book, when she was "married". Her feelings about marriage are well displayed in a statement she makes in chapter ten, when she claims she does not "want to go through that again", referring to marriage and pregnancy (110). She talks about marriage as a battlefield, as something really hard to endure and that she does not want to live once again. When she thinks or talks about marriage, love and cherish seem to lack completely. Her vision of maternity and pregnancy too is undermined by the terrible experience she had during her first relationship. The description of the forced abortion is really eerie and awkward, just like her distorted vision of doctors and their tools:

> After the first I didn't ever want to have another child, it was too much to go through for nothing, they shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and they don't let you see, they don't want you to understand, they want you to believe it's their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practising on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. After that they fill your veins up with red plastic. I saw it running down through the tube. I won't let them do that to me ever again. (100)

This quote highlights the Surfacer's feelings of powerlessness when forced to lie down with her hands tied. She knows she is not in control of her body anymore and she is aware she is being treated like flesh, like "a dead pig." The narrator of *Surfacing* seems to reject motherhood and women's stereotypical role of mothers, when she claims that she does not want to "go through all that again," just like Marian seems to be grossed out by Clara's life as a wife and, above all, as a mother. The protagonist feels doubly betrayed by her fake husband because, not only did he force her to abort the child they had together, but he did not even show up at the hospital when she had to undergo the painful procedure which will cause her a severe psychological trauma. "In the car I didn't cry, I didn't want to look at him. 'I know it is tough', he said, 'but it's better this way.'. . . He'd abdicated, betrayed what I'd assumed were his principles, in order to be saved, by me, from me, and he'd got nothing by it" (112) is what she recalls of that awful day.

The theme of betrayal is highly present in *Surfacing*, as the narrator feels betrayed by almost anyone in the book and not only by her ex-lover. The Surfacer strongly admires her strong-willed mother and her resilience to her severe illness and was absolutely sure she would eventually overcome cancer, and when she died, the daughter felt disappointed. When her father mysteriously disappeared, she was "furious with him for vanishing like this, unresolved, leaving [her] with no answers to give them when they ask" (71). Having no grave where to mourn her father is what annoys her the most. She is visibly angry with her parents because "they had control over their death, they decided it was time to leave and they left, they set up this barrier. They didn't consider how [she] would feel, who would take care of [her]" (223). Although her social alienation starts early in her childhood, these further events, social

pressure, her failed “marriage”, abortion and difficult relationship with parents, lead to the worsening of the condition; she gradually becomes alienated from everyone and everything, her companions, society, civilization and herself. (Biroğlu 61)

Unfortunately the narrator’s relationship with her current boyfriend, Joe, is no less problematic and morally questionable. Joe is mostly silenced in the narration and depicted as quiet and reserved, thus making it difficult for readers to define and understand such an enigmatic character. Despite being rather taciturn in the novel, according to Henry C. Phelps, Joe shows a “blend of overt concern and strained hostility toward women” (112). His bad attitude towards women is particularly signaled by his “neutral mumble”, when asking the narrator whether she had any news about her father, which, according to the protagonist, “signals he’d prefer it if I [the narrator] kept from showing any reaction, no matter what has happened” (31). This is not the way Joe should act, if he really loved her, but he would be supposed to show fully support to her during the difficult journey. Despite his quietness, which may be mistaken for goodness, Joe is really selfish and does not care about her girlfriend’s well-being or her beloved father. The word “love” is once again missing over the course of their relationship, just like in Marian and Peter’s. “We should get married” (109) says Joe emotionally detached and cool. But if on the one hand Joe is not able to fully and truly express his feelings, the reaction of the narrator certainly does not sound more reassuring:

> I set the cup down carefully on the rock and turned to look at him, shielding my eyes. I wanted to laugh, it was incongrous . . . he’d never asked whether I loved him, that was supposed to come first, I would have been prepared for that. ‘Why?’ I said. ‘We’re living together anyway. We don’t need a certificate for that. . . . It wouldn’t make any difference.’
> ‘Then why not do it?’ He had moved closer, he was being logical, he was threatening me with something. I swivelled, scouting for help . . .

> ‘No,’ I said, the only answer to logic. It was because I didn’t want to, that’s why it would gratify him, it would be a sacrifice, of my reluctance, my distaste. (109)

She is even cooler than he is, because she has numbed herself on purpose in order to keep her bad memories well suppressed and prevent them from surfacing. Readers cannot fully understand how the narrator feels about Joe as she claims she is “trying to decide whether or not [she] love[s] him” (49), but sympathize with her definition of Joe’s feelings for her, when she concludes by saying that “he didn’t love [her], it was an idea of himself he loved and he wanted someone to join him” (140). Just like Marian, and Anna of course, the protagonist of *Surfacing* has being fooled and mistreated. Joe has been clever all along, he pretended he loved her, to make sure she would not leave him. But if on the one hand the narrator, just like many other women, was monopolized and compelled to love her man, on the other, having already experienced a similar situation with her fake husband, she is now more determined than ever, not to let anyone oppress her. Indeed, although still acting rather passively, already at the beginning of the story her rebelliousness against men and society starts surfacing, and it seems to emerge sooner than Marian’s. In the first chapter of the novel she calls Joe a “packsack . . . a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction” (4), probably referring to his lack of emotions. The reference to the “packsack” could also be seen as a symbol of man’s physical strength, a characteristic which is stereotypically attributed to men. By calling him that way, she makes an important statement: she is aware that he is not good for her and that he represents a danger for her journey towards self-discovery and self-realization. As can be easily understood, the quiet and silent Joe is not so harmless. Deep down in her heart the protagonist knows, and seems rather sure, that this kind of man limiting and threatening women is doomed

to fail in that new era, the 1960s, of social and economical changes for women. Nonetheless the Surfacer, at least at the beginning, is still a victim of patriarchal society and its pressures.

The lives of both Marian and the protagonist of *Surfacing*, as victims of society, are characterized by passivity and adjustments, as they try to survive the patriarchy. Not only does Peter try to change Marian according to his own will, but also Ainsley attempts to turn Marian into the "perfect woman" before the party:

> Ainsley pawed through them. 'No,' she said, with the decisiveness of someone who really knew. 'These won't do. I've got a pair that'll work, though.' . . . 'That's better,' she said. 'Now smile.' Marian smiled, weakly. Ainsley shook her head. 'Your hair's okay,' she said, 'but really you'd better let me do your face for you. You'll never manage it for yourself. you'd just do it in your usual skimpy way and come out looking like a kid playing dress-up in her mother's clothes.' She wadded Marian into her chair, which was lumpy with garments in progressive stages of dirtiness, and tucked a towel around her neck. 'I'll do your nails first so they can be drying,' she said, adding while she began to file them, 'looks like you've been biting them.' . . . During the rest of the procedure, while strange things were being done to her skin, then to each eye and each eyebrow, Marian sat passively, marveling at the professional efficiency with which Ainsley was manipulating her features. (277, 278)

This long quote perfectly summarizes Marian's passive attitude. Throughout the first half of the novel the protagonist accepts her condition of inferiority and let everyone choose for her. Although the situation often hurts her, she does nothing to change her status as victim. When analyzing her own behavior and actions, she claims that the decision to accept Peter as her fiancé "was a little sudden but . . . it is actually a very good step to take" (123). This statement undoubtedly stems from the notion that all women eventually will and have to "marry someone . . . and have children, everyone does" (123, 124), because that is how society used to work.

Although she feels something is wrong with the way things are, Marian keeps conforming to the authority, by passively accepting everything happening around her. She thinks it is normal to adjust to other people's wills or situations because "life isn't run by principles but by adjustments" (124). The same pattern recurs in relation to her job. When she is forced to sign her pension plan, Marian feels anxious about her life in the future, but does not do anything to change it. Significantly, as Lilburn states, her job consists in turning the "convoluted and subtle prose of market study questionnaires" (13) into questions that the average consumer can easily understand and answer. Just like she changes the questionnaires to make them more suitable for the general public, Marian keeps turning herself into someone she is not, in order to please society and live up to others' expectations. She buys a new dress and gets her hair done because Peter wants her to, she lets him manipulate her in many occasions (just think of the lovemaking scene in the bathtub) and tends to silence her voice in his presence. Basically Marian encounters several obstacles in her life-path, most notably Peter's moods and will to control her, but, as we will see later, she is able to cope with every difficulty and challenge she bumps into and will eventually break the chains of oppression through the final baking of a woman-shaped cake.

A very significant episode which helps the reader to better define Marian's passivity is to be found at the beginning of chapter twenty. The chapter opens with the protagonist "walking slowly down the aisle, keeping pace with the gentle music that swelled and rippled around her" (213). The aisle, which could remind of a church, is actually the supermarket aisle, where Marian is doing the grocery shopping for the dinner she has organized, so that Peter can finally meet her friends. The scene is very important, because Marian is actually aware the

music playing there is nothing but a trick to make customers buy more. Yet, knowing that does not make her less immune to it. In short, she is fully aware that she is a victim of commercial market techniques and the patriarchal world, but does not do anything. (Lilburn 68)

The scene which mostly conveys Marian's passivity is the episode at the beauty salon, a space which is typically dedicated to women, where Marian's discomfort is strongly tangible, especially when she describes what is being made to her. After "leaning back against the operating-table" (262), she wishes she was given some anesthetics, in order not to feel the "pain" inflicted to her. The experience at a beauty salon should be pleasant and relaxing, but this is not Marian's case, who is terrified, because she is aware the beauty salon symbolically represents society, which brainwashes women. She suddenly feels her body "curiously paralysed" (262). What Marian fears is any kind of artificiality or change on her body without her consent. She wants to be anesthetized because she is aware of what they are doing to her: she is just an object being corrected, manipulated and changed. Completely terrified, she finds "herself shrugging mentally" (264). She seems not to be accustomed to that kind of environment, as when she enters she notices that "it was amazing how such frivolously feminine decorations could look at the same time so functional" (262). When she walks through the door of the beauty salon, she feels she is "being admitted to a hospital to have an operation" (262). The comparison of the experience at the beauty salon to a hospital operation conveys how frightening and painful that moment is for Marian. Her body paralyzes as the "doctor" begins to work. The way she describes the scene and her word-choices is very significant, as she does not sit under the dryer, but she is "led away and installed" (262), two verbs which imply that someone else has taken and sat her there. She passively observes what

other people do to her without moving or doing anything. When attempting to describe the other women, who are seated under the dryer as well, she claims that all she sees is a "row of strange creatures with legs of various shapes and hands that [hold] magazines and heads that [are] metal domes. Inert; totally inert" and describes the whole scene as a "compound of the simply vegetable and the simply mechanical" (263). She seems to be the only one understanding the absurdity of all those mechanical actions women are led to perform at the beauty salon. The whole scene undoubtedly conveys the overwhelming sense of alienation felt by many women in the patriarchal society. But although she realizes how absurd that situation is, "she [resigns] herself to the necessity of endurance" (263). When she finally sees her hair done and realizes she looks completely artificial, she simply accepts her new look and walks home.

Marian's passivity is also to be found in her reaction to Peter's proposal. When he asks her to marry him, she "[draws] back from him" and sees herself "small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (98). Although her answer is not known to readers, in the next chapter they find out she must have agreed to marry her boyfriend, as she tells Ainsley she and Peter got engaged. The next morning when she wakes up her, she feels "at first empty as though someone had scooped the inside of [her] skull like a cantaloupe and left [her] only the rind to think with" (99). Peter's proposal seems to have shaken her just enough to make her wonder whether she could "face an egg" (99). Immediately after accepting, albeit not explicitly, his marriage proposal, Marian's relationship with food becomes problematic. Ainsley's reaction to her roommate's engagement leaves readers a little bit astonished, not because of the piece of news per se, as Ainsley is not a big fan of marriage, but because Marian is a friend of her. "Well, if I

were you I'd get married in the States, it'll be so much easier to get a divorce when you need one," (100) claims Ainsley apparently without remorse. She does not approve of Marian's decision to marry Peter, because she thinks she does not know him enough. Throughout the next chapters Marian keeps trying to convince herself that she has made the right choice, which undoubtedly makes it almost impossible for the readers to believe her. Once again her passivity had the better of her and led her to take a choice, which she actually was not willing to take. Actually in the first third of the book, she seems not to make a single decision, but she just lets "the current hold her up, trusting it to take her where she was going" (139). For most part of the novel Marian keeps playing the role she has been assigned by society. But can readers really blame her or all those women who comply with what is being told them? It is not that she does not want to rebel or make her voice heard, but she, like all women, has been manipulated into accepting what happens without asking herself some legitimate questions.

The female protagonist of *Surfacing* acts rather passively as well. She decided that in order to keep her bad memories, especially the abortion of her child, well suppressed, she should numb herself, hide any emotion, whether of joy or sadness, and live only through other people's lives and bodies, in order to start over and get rid of her painful past. She has purposely emotionally numbed herself beforehand and prevented herself from suffering again. When asked whether she loves Joe or not, she replies, "I want to . . . I do in a way" (135), but actually does not. At the beginning of the book and while being "married", she purposely refuses to take a position on anything, thus letting herself go with the flow, just like Marian. In chapter thirteen the Surfacer claims that "it was a relief, to be exempt from feeling" (143) but, although it is certainly true, as the novel reveals it is impossible to start over by erasing one's

past. Bad memories do not just go away, but have to be faced, in order to to be overcome, otherwise they will keep coming out. The narrator of *Surfacing* emotionally blocks herself in order to protect her soul from any further suffering. She has built an unhealthy barrier between herself and other people. Her coldness and detachment, which function as a tool to numb her pain, deeply impress Joe the first time they make love.

Not only is the passivity of the Surfacer self-imposed, but she seems to be a victim of patriarchy and male oppression just like Marian. When she was pregnant with her baby, she reports her fake husband forced her to get an abortion: "he said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't a person, only an animal. . . . I could have said no, but I didn't" (185). She could have refused to comply to his rules, but she chose to remain passive and powerless. The question whether her choice was a real choice or not is more than legitimate. Just like in *The Edible Woman*, in *Surfacing* the protagonist, as a woman, has always been taught and conditioned by society to accept her surroundings without questioning them, which led to a distortion of the truth and reality. The narrator's passive attitude is also to be found, as it has already been pointed out, in her acceptance of what her fake husband thought was the best working option for her. The passiveness of the two female protagonists of both books will eventually and gradually fade away and pave the way to their rebellion, which will lead them to achieve an identity of their own.

All things considered, after having analyzed the first phase Marian and the Surfacer go through, it could be argued that the two protagonists' oppression and exploitation is something most women experience in their life as victim of the patriarchal system. It is no coincidence

that the narrator of *Surfacing* has no name, but it could reveal that the difficulties this woman encounters throughout the novel actually represent the challenges millions of women all over the world have to face everyday (Gautam, "Role of Nature in Self-Exploration in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*" 1). Indeed, the two female protagonists are not the only ones in the novels who suffer as women living in a strictly patriarchal society. In *The Edible Woman* Clara, despite claiming giving birth is "fascinating" (156), is overwhelmed by motherhood and the "chaotic domesticity" (Keith 47) she is surrounded by, the office virgins are unwittingly oppressed by the notion that society has always been trying to inculcate in their minds, that they need to marry sooner or later unless they want to end up spinsters and ostracized, and Ainsley, despite owning the spirit of rebellion against society at the beginning, slowly loses her trademark and eventually gets married with Fischer, giving up everything she believed in. In *Surfacing* Anna is the victim of David's sexist jokes, aggressive and violent attitude and is tricked by him and society into thinking women need to let go and make a commitment when getting married, while the protagonist's mother, despite being a strong and resilient woman, still used to adapt her life to her husband's and numbed herself emotionally just like her daughter. Therefore, it can be said that the story and experience of the two female protagonists is not an isolated case, but it seems to be the unlucky fate of every woman. The two women seem to go through the same suffering, as both victims of men, both restricted by gender roles and labor division present in society, both passively accepting their destiny and using their detachment from life to survive and prevent themselves from being overwhelmed by external events. But there is a little difference between the way the Surfacer copes with her life and the way Marian lives hers. The narrator of *Surfacing* seems a little bit more aware of society's

mechanisms to entangle women, as well as of the trapping nature of marriage or restricting role of mother and seems to be willing to rebel right from the start. Probably her greater readiness to act stems from the fact she has more experience and is much more familiar with men, relationships and society than Marian. Indeed the Surfacer has been pregnant once and, although not married, she came close to marriage twice. Having already being pregnant, she already knows she does not "want to go through all that again" (111). Her skepticism when listening to Anna's words about women's need to let go and make a commitment in order for a marriage to work makes readers understand that, despite being a victim of the system just like all women, a spark of rebellion against already established institutions and preexisting ideas about women is already emerging in her. Her rebellion is much more tangible than Marian's at the beginning, who needs much more time to realize what she really needs to do to find her own place in the world. Marian seems rather a beginner, and appears much more stuck in ridiculous society's expectations of women. Despite that, both of them, including Marian, are rather detached from the stereotypical image of women in the 1950s and 1960s, because both, in their own different way, do not really believe marriage and maternity is women's only destiny in life and will go through a process, which will lead them to freedom and self-realization.

3.2

"Do you think I'm normal?"[8]: Marian's and the Surfacer's Breakdown As a Form of Rebellion against Patriarchy

As already noted in the previous chapter, the two protagonists of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* go through a similar phase at the beginning, as they are both victims of the patriarchal and misogynistic society they live in. The second phase the two female narrators experience, which will be the focus of this chapter, sees Marian and the Surfacer rebel against societal pressures in a rather peculiar way. Their long-lasting oppression gradually starts making them feel uneasy and their discomfort becomes visible through the appearance of some symptoms preceding the upcoming breakdown. Even though the breakdown in both novels derives from the same experience the two women share as victims of society, its development is rather different: Marian will suffer from a strange form of anorexia nervosa, while the Surfacer will develop schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder. Although the two forms of madness are undoubtedly different, they are both characterized by constant paranoia, anxiety and hallucinations and will both pave the way for a positive outcome, as Marian and the Surfacer will eventually recover and become self-reliant women. In short, schizophrenia and anorexia nervosa, despite causing physical injury and mental damage, constitute the means through which the two women can finally break free of social pressure and regain their identity.

8 Atwood, Margaret. *The Edible Woman.* Virago Press, 2009, p. 256.

As the breakdown they will go through has a positive impact on the two female protagonists in the end, giving them the chance to regain control of their life, it can be stated that in the case of *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* Marian's and the Surfacer's identity crisis is beneficial and productive. In *The Edible Woman* the protagonist, still not experienced enough or familiar with the mechanisms used by society to trap women, needs someone to support her throughout her journey back to life. In the case of Marian the most significant element, which helps her to break the oppression cycle and consequently experience the breakdown she will go through in the second part of the novel, is undoubtedly Duncan. Duncan, who has a strong and positive influence on Marian, functions as the one who wakes her from the passive state she is in. One day Marian is expected to conduct a market research survey about beer and, after having already got several interviews, she heads to "the square apartment-building" (52), skipping all the houses standing before it. She knocks twice at the first door and, at the second knock, a young boy, "a starved buddha burning incense to itself" (56), shows up. The meeting between Marian and Duncan – this is the name of the boy – is rather awkward. They both keep staring at each other without saying a word, as Marian keeps scrutinizing him:

> He rubbed one of his eyes with a finger, as if he had just got up. He was cadaverously thin; he had no shirt on, and the ribs stuck out like those of an emaciated figure in a medieval woodcut. The skin stretched over them was nearly colourless, not white but closer to the sallow tone of old linen. His feet were bare; he was wearing only a pair of khaki pants. The eyes, partly hidden by a rumpled mass of straight black hair that came down over the forehead, were obstinately melancholy, as though he was assuming the expression on purpose. (53)

Marian, who initially thought the boy was only fifteen, soon discovers that he is actually twenty-six. Once he results as qualified for the questionnaire, he invites her in. As there is no room available for them to sit, Marian is led to Duncan's bedroom, where she

finally starts collecting answers for her interview. Duncan's answers are so imaginative that Marian starts wondering whether he is "tottering on an emotional brink" (58). For example, when she asks what "deep-down manly flavour" makes him think of, he replies, "sweat, . . . canvas gym shoes. Underground locker-rooms and jock-straps" (57). While responding to the questionnaire, Duncan, who clearly has no filters and does not care about other people's judgments, mocks the same questions he is giving answers to. The interview makes Marian feel uncomfortable and disoriented, as the whole scene itself seems surrounded by an extremely surreal atmosphere. While asking questions, Marian realizes that the latter are making Duncan tense and anxious. At the end of the questionnaire Duncan reveals that he actually never drinks beer, but only scotch, and that he had lied at the beginning when he picked number six on Marian's average-weekly-consumption card, because "he was bored; [he] felt like talking to someone" (59). "You have to admit I've livened up your day considerably" (60), Duncan brazenly tells Marian, but she actually feels annoyed, irritated and confused at the same time because of his attitude:

> I had a twinge of irritation. I had been feeling compassion for him as a sufferer on the verge of mental collapse, and now he had revealed the whole thing as a self-conscious performance. I could either get up and leave at once, showing my displeasure, or admit he was right. I frowned at him, trying to decide what to do. (60)

At the end of chapter six Marian gets to know that Duncan actually drinks beer; he simply did not want to finish the interview. The young man has surely made an impression on Marian, whether good or bad, and once outside the apartment she realizes that the notes she "has made of his answers [are] almost indecipherable in the glare of sunlight" (61). Duncan's outlandish and peculiar answers are highly significant, as they show how confident and

unconcerned about others the young man is. Indeed, he is neither interested in what other people think of him nor does he adjust to others' expectations or comply to society's standards and notion of normality.

As the relationship between Marian and Peter evolves when he proposes to her, Marian keeps seeing Duncan, who apparently functions as her outlet, relieving her from all the stress and anxiety caused by Peter's oppressive presence and monopolizing attitude. The day after the proposal Marian decides to go to the laundromat, but once there she finds out that she has no soap. A young man offers her some and she immediately realizes that this is Duncan. One more time the conversation between the two, which resembles a monologue involving Duncan only, takes a weird turn. Duncan tells the protagonist that he loves coming to the laundromat because he finds it comforting to watch the washers and that he likes ironing because it is a very practical activity. Later, he explains to Marian that he is an English graduate student, just like his roommates, but does not seem very excited about it, as he claims, "it's like anything else: you've got stuck in it and you can't get out" (116). When Marian asks him what he is writing his final thesis on, he replies, "I haven't got to that point yet. I don't know when I ever will or what will happen then. I try not to think about it. Right now I'm supposed to be writing an overdue term paper from the year before last. I write a sentence a day. On good days, that is" (117). Duncan's characterization borders on the absurd and grotesque: he is aimless, selfish, unconventional, spontaneous and does not think about his future at all. In other words, he is the complete opposite of Marian, who constantly worries about her future with Peter and at Seymour Surveys. As the protagonist herself claims in the novel, "he [Duncan] definitely wouldn't fit" (118) but, actually, he does not even want to. Duncan, in contrast to Marian, is

aware of society's mechanisms to establish absurd unwritten rules and monopolize human beings. He claims that in what he calls the "braingrinder", the university, "for a while you don't sound as though you're from anywhere" (118), because anything "different" is erased and made plainly "normal," which is clearly a critique to the process of forced indoctrination that makes all individuals the same. When they both leave the laundromat and almost collide, they keep staring at each other for a minute and kiss. The kiss between the two is probably one of the first actions Marian performs, without worrying about Peter's or society's expectations. Duncan's positive role in the novel seems to benefit the female protagonist, as the spontaneous kiss the two exchange signals that Marian unconsciously is already beginning to rebel. The female protagonist, once again impressed by the man's attitude, seems to admire Duncan's spontaneous and unfiltered "liquid confessing" (119), because she thinks that she would be unable to do the same. Her inability to act naturally and spontaneously like Duncan probably stems from the fact that she feels trapped by society's expectations about women and accordingly she cannot act the way she would like to. Her feeling of powerlessness, which permeates the whole novel, will gradually disappear thanks to the influence of Duncan, who will help her to gain self-awareness. Despite Marian's wedding coming up, the two keep seeing each other often. One day, Marian receives a call from Duncan, who asks her to bring him some ironing. While ironing, his apparently pointless digressions resurface, as he wonders how anything gets ever done, if every action is repeated endlessly. On that occasion they kiss again and when Marian tells him that she is engaged, he brazenly says, "That's your problem, then" (176), admitting that Marian only functions as a replacement for the laundromat and that their "relationship" is not serious. After the Seymour Surveys holiday office party Marian meets

Duncan once again, this time sitting on a snowy bench in a park, and joins him. Another scene in the book displays the two entering a museum together, where Duncan suggests that they should go to bed together, but she, thinking about Peter, refuses. That same day, Marian joins Duncan and his roommates for dinner.

A significant episode regarding the "relationship" between Marian and Duncan is to be found at Peter's party. As already noted in the previous chapter, Marian has been manipulated into looking "perfect" according to Peter's and society's own standards of femininity. At the beauty salon she is aware that she looks completely artificial, but she accepts her new look to please her fiancé. During the party the office virgins, embodying society's manipulative attitude, compliment Marian's dress and look, thus implying that she should look this way more often. Duncan's reaction, upon his arrival, is completely different. When Marian opens the door to welcome him and his roommates, the latter do not recognize her. Duncan takes Marian aside and says, "You didn't tell me it was a masquerade" (300), implying that, contrary to what all the other guests think, Marian's new look does not reflect her true self. Suddenly, she imagines that she is "walking along one of the corridors" (305) and wonders how Peter will look like in the future. She tries to reassure herself by thinking, "he would have hobbies, he would be comfortable, he would be normal" (305) and starts searching for him. As she opens the first door, she sees Peter at forty-five, standing beside a barbecue and wearing a chef's apron, but she realizes, as she is looking for herself, that she is not there with him. Therefore, she concludes that this must be the wrong room. When she opens the last door, she can see that

> Peter [is] there, dressed in his dark opulent winter suit. He [has] a camera in his hand; but now she [sees] what it really [is]. There [are] no more doors and when she [feels] behind her for the doorknob, afraid to take her eyes off him, he [raises] the camera and [aims] it at her; his

> mouth [opens] in a snarl of teeth. There [is] a blinding flash of light. (306)

Terrified of seeing a future where she plays the victim once again, Marian decides to flee. While Peter prepares to take a group photo, she runs away to avoid being "fixed indissolubly in that gesture" (308) and she is resolute not to let him catch her. She spends the night with Duncan at a hotel.

In the light of what has been said so far, we can say that Marian's unconscious rebellion is signaled by her meeting with Duncan, whose role in the novel is highly significant. Indeed, every time Marian hangs around with him, she is able to forget the cruel reality surrounding her, as time stops or even vanishes. The first time she sees him, she claims that "time [seems] to have shifted into slow motion" (53), while in chapter twenty-five she feels they have "no past and certainly no future" (227). While with Duncan Marian enjoys the present moment and does not worry about what usually concerns her the most: her uncertain future. When they are sitting together on the park bench after the Seymour Surveys holiday office party, time outside the park seems to vanish, leaving the two completely immersed in the present moment; she, huddled inside Duncan's coat, feels that her body is numbing and beginning to shiver. Duncan is the means through which Marian finally becomes aware of the external forces influencing her and can eventually regain control of her life, as he seems to function as a guide accompanying her on "her downward journey, descent into the dark side of the self" (Gautam, "Female Self-enslavement 706). If we look closely at Duncan's behavior, we may conclude that he seems to embody Marian's other self, the one who is not subjugated by society. While Duncan fails to act the way he is required to by society, Marian, on the contrary, tries to resist anything which is not considered respectable or "normal" enough, by adjusting to other

people's moods and desires, and seems to long to live freely just like he does. Duncan's influence on the victimized and passive female protagonist is highly significant, as he is one of the main elements in the novel that helps her to understand the farce she is living in. Indeed, when Duncan shows up at the door of his house and Marian sees him for the first time, she starts realizing that the questionnaires that she is carrying have "suddenly become unrelated to anything at all, and at the same time obscurely threatening" (53). In short, it is through Duncan that Marian will eventually find her way back to reality as a new and independent woman.

If Duncan is the one who makes it possible for Marian to experience a cathartic breakdown and finally regain control of her life, the Surfacer does not need any spiritual guide to induce her to rebel against patriarchy. Indeed, having already experienced betrayals and monopolization by her parents and former lover, she starts showing strong signs of dissent right from the beginning. However, as we will see later, the female protagonist is not completely left to herself. Undoubtedly, her parents function as a kind of guide for her but, in contrast to Duncan, they only show up at the very end of the book, when the Surfacer's transformation process into a "natural woman" has already started and almost come to its conclusion. Nonetheless, their role is important, because their appearance constitutes the last significant step, which allows the narrator to face her painful past and get over it once and for all, thus becoming a full-fledged adult.

As Marian's and the Surfacer's rebellion against patriarchy manifests itself through a debilitating but cathartic breakdown, it is important to point out in what way their mental and physical health starts getting worse and, consequently, in what way they start revolting. In both novels the two narrators gradually come to experience a complete dissociation from their own

body and mind, detaching themselves from other people and the world itself. Their dissociation from reality is signaled by some episodes in the books that happen to be really significant.

As already noted in the previous chapter, it is Marian's relationship with Peter that gradually leads her to dissolution. Although her mental health starts deteriorating significantly after Peter's proposal, there are some episodes prior to it, which already give the readers an idea of the protagonist's delicate health. Chapter six opens with a description of a dream "in which [Marian] had looked down and seen [her] feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly, and had put on a pair of rubber boots just in time only to find that the ends of [her] fingers were turning transparent" (47). This nightmare, which mirrors Marian's actual fear that her identity and personality might be fading away, may function as a warning sign reminding her that, if she keeps adjusting to other people's moods, she will disappear completely. Her subconscious is trying to warn her of what could actually happen, if she gives up her own needs and desires in favor of others'. In another scene of the book, while she is taking a bath alone, she looks at the two taps for the hot and cold water and notices that "in each of the three silver globes . . . there [is] a curiously sprawling pink thing" and, only later, "she recognize[s], in the bulging and distorted forms, her own waterlogged body" (273). Marian's alienation from her own body makes it impossible for her to immediately identify those "distorted forms," which she sees reflected on the taps of the bathtub, as belonging to her. Although she shows signs of distress and discomfort since the beginning, chapters eight and nine, which precede Peter's proposal, definitely signal the beginning of Marian's downward bumpy journey into madness. In chapter eight she decides to take Peter to meet Len. When they reach the roof of the Park Plaza, the place of the appointment, Marian immediately spots her friend and, once seated, they are

joined by Ainsley. As she understands that Ainsley has found in Len the perfect candidate for her purpose, the protagonist gets furious with her roommate for having put her in such an awkward position. At this point of the narration, after wondering what she should do about Ainsley's plan, Marian overhears the aforementioned conversation between Peter and Len about hunting. Peter's voice, which "seem[s] to be getting louder and faster" (80), makes the protagonist feel uncomfortable and anxious, as she would like him to turn and talk to her. During the conversation Peter is having with Len, Marian's alienation from her body reaches its peak and is signaled by her failure to acknowledge that she is crying:

> After a while I noticed with mild curiosity that a large drop of something wet had materialized on the table near my hand. I poked it with my finger and smudged it around a little before I realized with horror that it was a tear. I must be crying then! Something inside me started to dash about in dithering mazes of panic, as though I had swallowed a tadpole. (81)

By reading these lines, the audience immediately learns that the breakdown is around the corner. As she cannot stand listening to Peter's terrible story, probably because she identifies with the doomed rabbit, Marian "[slides] out of [her] chair, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, [walks] across the room avoiding the other tables with great care, and [goes] out to the Ladies' Powder Room" (81). She decides to lock herself "into one of the plushy-pinky cubicles" (81) and cries. Understandably, Marian cannot immediately figure out why she feels and acts that way. She compares herself to the toilet paper, "helpless and white and furry, waiting passively for the end" (81). Reluctantly, she walks back to the table, but soon Peter gives her "a peculiar look, as though he was disappointed with [her]" (82). She finally understands that his look conveyed that their relationship is more serious than she had thought all along. This notion makes her panic and feel like "the murmuring air was filled with a soft

menace" (82). Once they all leave the bar, Marian decides to run away, rather than cope with what she fears the most: being locked into a future she will not be able to escape, in this case, marriage. Her flight undoubtedly conveys Marian's resistance to male oppression and patriarchal victimization of women.

Once caught by Peter, she is taken to Len's. She is soon attracted to the quietness of "the dark cool space between the bed and the wall" (89) and decides to hide there. Now that she has "dug [herself] a private burrow" (90), she feels safe and can see her apparently nonsensical behavior more clearly. She learns that the reason why she had run away was because "she was evading reality" (91) but what kind of reality that was, she had no idea: "I had broken out; from what, or into what, I did not know" (93). Although she does not know what she is revolting against and cannot fully grasp the signals her body is sending to her yet, she is slowly beginning to figure out what is wrong with her life. Down there, she starts thinking about her relationship in the past four months:

> All summer we had been moving in a certain direction, though it hadn't felt like movement: we had deluded ourselves into thinking we were static. Ainsley had warned me that Peter was monopolizing me; . . . Peter and I had avoided talking about the future because we knew it didn't matter: we weren't really involved. Now, though, something in me had decided we were involved: surely that was the explanation for the powder-room collapse and the flight. (91)

While analyzing her life and relationship with Peter, she concludes that "[she] would have to face it [reality]. [She] would have to decide what [she] want[s] to do" (91). She seems more resolute than ever to face the whole situation that she had been trying to avoid all along. Initially, she likes lying there with no one watching her, but soon she starts feeling uncomfortable and wishes someone would come and help her. When Peter stands her up,

Marian is furious and does not want to go back with him. Her feelings in chapters eight and nine are really ambiguous: she feels the need to escape, but still she wants Peter to find her and seems to feel relieved when that happens. Once outside of Len's house, Marian feels better and starts walking away, but, once again, Peter finds her. Reluctantly, she gives in to him and allows herself to get in his car. Peter, who does not understand her fiancée's absurd behavior, thinks that she is just "rejecting her femininity" (95). But Marian, who cannot stand Peter's monopolizing and know-it-all attitude, answers back: "Oh, SCREW my femininity" (95). She is slowly realizing that what she is actually rejecting is Peter as a husband and his rather distorted idea of femininity. She finally starts seeing his fiancé's true nature, looking at her "as though he was taking aim" (95). However, while in the car, as they are sitting with their foreheads pressed together and looking at each other, Peter proposes. Undoubtedly, the sudden and uncontrollable episodes of anxiety which Marian keeps experiencing throughout the book, are a direct manifestation of her desire to break free. As the novel unfolds, these panic attacks, albeit painful, make her more and more aware of the external forces monopolizing and subjugating her.

In *Surfacing* the process through which the protagonist comes to terms with her victim status and rebels against it is much different. Before analyzing the Surfacer's actual breakdown, it is important to take into consideration the elements of insurrection and resistance, which are to be found in the novel. When David forces Anna to take off her clothes, she reluctantly agrees to do that. The whole conversation between the married couple makes the narrator furious:

> "It's token resistance," David said, "she wants to, she's an exhibitionist at heart. She likes her lush body, don't you? Even if she is getting too

> fat.” “Don't think I don't know what you're trying to do,” Anna said, as though she'd guessed a riddle. “You're trying to humiliate me.”
> “What's humiliating about your body, darling?” David said caressingly. “We all love it, you ashamed of it? That's pretty stingy of you, you should share the wealth; not that you don't.”
> Anna was furious now, goaded, her voice rose. “Fuck off, you want bloody everything don't you, you can't use that stuff on me.”
> “Why not,” David said evenly, “it works. Now just take it off like a good girl or I'll have to take it off for you.”
> “Leave her alone,” Joe said, swinging his legs, bored or excited, it was impossible to tell.
> I wanted to run down to the dock and stop them, fighting was wrong, we weren't allowed to, if we did both sides got punished as in a real war. So we battled in secret, undeclared, and after a while I no longer fought back because I never won. The only defence was flight, invisibility. I sat down on the top step.
> “Shut up, she's my wife,” David said. His hand clamped down above her elbow. She jerked away, then I saw his arms go around her as if to kiss her and she was in the air, upside down over his shoulder, hair hanging in damp ropes. “Okay twatface,” he said, “is it off or into the lake?”
> Anna's fists grabbed bunches of his shirt. “If I go in, you go in too.” The words spurted from behind her fallen hair, she was kicking, I couldn't see whether she was laughing or crying.
> “Shoot,” David said to Joe, and to Anna, “I'll count to ten.”
> Joe swivelled the camera and trained it on them like a bazooka or a strange instrument of torture and pressed the button, lever, sinister whirr.
> “All right,” Anna said under its coercion, “you shmuck bastard, God damn you.” (172, 173)

Although the Surfacer chooses to do nothing to help Anna in that particular moment, she will perform a symbolic act later in the novel. In chapter twenty-one the protagonist “unzip[s] the bag with the camera equipment and lift[s] out the cannisters of film”, she “unwind[s] [it] standing full in the sun, and let[s] it spiral into the lake” (214). Even though Anna, “doleful as a prophet”, repeatedly warns her that she “better not do that” because “they'll [David and Joe] kill [her]” (214, 215), the narrator is more determined than ever to avenge her friend. By telling the narrator not to destroy the movie, Anna is visibly terrified of the men’s

possible reaction and does not seem to be relieved by the Surfacer's act of solidarity. Instead, she, "biting a knuckle" (215), grows more and more anxious as David and Joe are approaching them. By destroying *Random Samples*[9], the Surfacer conveys a significant message: not only does she want to avenge her friend Anna, but she also wants to do justice to all those women who are being oppressed and monopolized by men. It is no coincidence that the camera used by David and Joe to shoot their movie and Anna's naked body is "a signifier of the voyeuristic, objectifying male gaze" (Bouson, "Brutal Choreographies" 44). The destruction of the movie symbolically embodies the disruption of male supremacy. When the Surfacer gets rid of *Random Samples*, she feels as if she had just released "hundreds of tiny naked Annas no longer bottled and shelved" (215).

The protagonist's repulsion of the sexual act, distrust of the word "love", resistance to marriage and language are all signals of her rebellion towards preexisting ideas about women. In particular, her former lover's betrayal and monopolizing attitude, together with the forced abortion, made her distrustful of marriage and love. Indeed, when Joe proposes to her, she clearly states that she "[doesn't] want to go through that again" (111). The Surfacer, by engaging in a strong inner resistance to language, a tool which has been historically coded as masculine because it tends to obscure women, is resisting male power (Bouson, "Brutal Choreographies" 45). In "When Our Lips Speak Together" the Belgian feminist Luce Irigaray clearly explains how language, a masculine tool, hurts women, and wants to induce them to create and use their own words instead of preexisting and male forged ones:

> If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they taught us to speak, we will fail each

9 *Random Samples* is the name of David's and Joe's movie.

> other. Again. . . . Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads, disappear, make us disappear. Far. Above. Absent from ourselves, we become machines that are spoken, machines that speak. Clean skins envelop us, but they are not our own. We have fled into proper names, we have been violated by them, not yours, not mine. We don't have names. We change them as men exchange us, as they use us. it's frivolous to be so changeable so long as we are a medium of exchange. (69)

The Surfacer, throughout the novel, makes an effort to create her own language, without using the one that has been imposed on her. She wants to avoid talking as if "the words were coming out of [her] like the mechanical words from a talking doll" (111). Of course, it is difficult to find one's own voice in a world, which repeatedly tells and forces women to act, dress or speak in a certain way. When she has to reply to Joe's question whether she loves him or not, initially she cannot answer because she is aware that "it [is] the language again, [she] [cannot] use it because it [is not] [hers]" (135). As she replies, claiming that she loves him in a way, she struggles while talking, trying to hunt "through [her] brain for any emotion that would coincide with what [she] [has] said" (135). Throughout the whole novel the Surfacer keeps struggling with language, because she knows that she should create her own instead of using the masculine discourse. The fact she resists language shows that she is aware that the latter is nothing but a tool apt to constrain and limit women. It is no coincidence that later in the novel, once gone crazy, the narrator needs to concentrate to talk to David because "the English words [seem] imported, foreign; it [is] like trying to listen to two separate conversations, each interrupting the other" (192). Nonetheless, she is able to unravel his true nature eventually as "the power flow[s] into [her] eyes" and realizes that he is an "impostor, a pastiche" (194). Just like Bouson in "Brutal Choreographies" claims, the narrator, by using a "feminist-dialogic strategy" (47), is able to unmask language as an exclusively masculine tool. (Bouson 45 – 47)

However, the fact that the Surfacer engages in an "internal commentary" (Bouson, "Brutal Choreographies" 46) does not only symbolically embody her resistance to male power, but may be also strictly connected to her past traumatic experiences and feelings of alienation from the present moment. It is no coincidence that *Surfacing* is made up of the narrator's unfiltered thoughts, through which the audience reads and understands the story. Indeed, most of the time the Surfacer does not react to situations but, as already noted, engages in an "internal commentary", which only the readers can get to know. She is continually absorbed in her thoughts and does not actively take part in the activities her friends engage in. She is alienated and estranged from anyone, including herself. At the beginning of the novel she cannot even recognize her home ground and when David tells her, "thought you said this would be bad, it's not bad at all" (13), the Surfacer is, once again, too much absorbed in her thoughts to be listening to him. Likewise, at the end of the first chapter, when the group of friends arrives to the lake, the narrator cannot help but worry that maybe they "are here too soon" (14). Probably, the fact that the unnamed narrator cannot concentrate on the present moment, but only lives through the past or engages in an inner conversation with herself, is connected to the post-traumatic stress disorder, which she probably suffers from. The latter would make her experience "intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the [traumatic] event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to stimuli recalling the event" (Caruth 5).

By resisting David's offensive language and behavior, the Surfacer also rejects American imperialism, which, like a disease, spreads and destroys nature. Indeed, although David repeatedly says that he hates Americans, he is actually one of them: he loves baseball

and technology, he overconsumes and perpetrates senseless violence just for the sake of it, in short he embodies most American vices. When the narrator and her friends meet the Americans, who will soon turn out to be Canadian, the Surfacer cannot but feel disgust for them:

> But they'd killed the heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference. Like the late show sci-fi movies, creatures from outer space, body snatchers injecting themselves into you dispossessing your brain, their eyes blank eggshells behind the dark glasses. (165)

Although the killers are Canadian, the Surfacer considers them Americans, as she believes that "if you look like them [the Americans] and talk like them and think like them then you are them" (165). As already noted in the previous chapter, the image of the hanged heron embodies the groundless violence of Americans. The protagonist cannot accept that an innocent animal is killed and hanged just for the sake of it. She feels so sick and disgusted at the sight of the dead animal, that she desires "a machine that could make them [the Americans] vanish . . . that would evaporate them without disturbing anything else, that way there would be more room for the animals, they would be rescued" (197). The dead heron, an image which haunts her throughout the whole novel, will later take on the shape of her own aborted baby, but may be also considered the protagonist's double, as both the Surfacer and the heron are victims of male violence. However, if on one hand she harshly criticizes Americans for being killers, on the other she is aware that the abortion "made [her] one of them too" (185). Nonetheless, the narrative "legitimizes her anger" (Bouson, "Brutal Choreographies" 49) and does not blame her the same way it blames the killers but, on the contrary, it seems to suggest

that the painful and emotionally overwhelming abortion procedure should not be put on the same level with the violence perpetrated by the Americans.

While analyzing the Surfacer's rebellious attitude, it is very important to focus on her physical appearance and way of dressing as well. She rejects to wear traditionally female clothing, such as long skirts or dresses, but instead prefers more comfortable stuff and goes for jeans or sweatshirts. At the beginning of the book, when Anna and the Surfacer have got out of the car, the latter tells her friend that "she should wear jeans or something" because she would have felt much more comfortable, but Anna does not want to because she thinks that "she looks fat in them" (8). The fact that the narrator prompts Anna to wear jeans, and wears them herself, may be a signal of a strong desire to rebel against social norms, as jeans are not considered to be feminine enough. The fact Anna refuses to listen to the Surfacer's piece of advice may indicate her inability to break free from social pressure. When the protagonist of *Surfacing* visits Madame and Paul in chapter two, she wonders what they think of her appearance:

> Madame, who is the same thickness all the way down, is in a long-skirted dress and black stockings and a print apron with a bib, Paul in high-waisted trousers with braces, flannel shirtsleeves rolled. I'm annoyed with them for looking so much like carvings, the habitant kind they sell in tourist handicraft shops; but of course it's the other way around, it's the carvings that look like them. I wonder what they think I look like, they may find my jeans and sweatshirt and fringed over-the-shoulder bag strange, perhaps immoral, though such things may be more common in the village since the tourists and the T.V.; besides, I can be forgiven because my family was, by reputation, peculiar as well as *anglais*. (20)

Madame may embody what society perceives as the "perfect woman", as she is thick "all the way down" and wears clothes that have been historically coded as feminine. Significantly, she wears an apron which symbolizes the kitchen, a woman's place *par*

excellence. While Madame adheres to society's unwritten rules, the Surfacer seems to be fully aware of the fact that she embodies a different kind of femininity, which does not conform to society's standards. The issue of clothing is highly significant when analyzing *Surfacing*, as it helps to outline the historical and social context the protagonist is fighting against, which may be summarized by the following quote:

> The old priest is definitely gone, he disapproved of slacks, the women had to wear long concealing skirts and dark stockings and keep their arms covered in church. Shorts were against the law, and many of them lived all their lives beside the lake without learning to swim because they were ashamed to put on bathing suits. (27)

As we can see, rebellion in *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* is expressed differently. The emergence of rebellion in Marian coincides with the worsening of her mental and physical health, as she flees twice from Peter and experiences dissociation from her body multiple times. Before the scene when she runs away, apart from some very small episodes of subconscious resistance (for example, when she disapproves of Clara's lifestyle), she is fully immersed in her role as victim. Instead, in *Surfacing*, as already pointed out in the previous chapter, the narrator is more experienced and starts rebelling from the very beginning. Most importantly, Marian's breakdown in *The Edible Woman* is very different from the one experienced by the Surfacer, because, despite being triggered, basically, by the same reason, the two women's anger and desire to break free will manifest very differently.

Marian, despite showing signs of rebellion even before chapter thirteen, significantly starts noticing something wrong with her body after Peter's proposal. Firstly, the worsening of her health is clearly signaled by the shift in narrative voice. While in the first part of the book, from chapter one to twelve included, the story is told by Marian in first person, the second part

is characterized by a shift to the third person. This shift undoubtedly destabilizes the reader, who, for a short time, cannot really understand what is happening, but immediately perceives that something is wrong. Significantly, Marian loses control of her own narration, just like she loses control of her life, once she accepts Peter's proposal; in this way the novel seems to convey the potential danger of marriage for women. Since Marian is no longer in control of the narration, her mental health gets worse and worse. The fact that Marian cannot control her own story anymore means that she is going through a psychic disintegration, which will culminate in her experience with the anorexia nervosa. But the switch from Marian's point of view to an external and more detached one could be also seen as positive, because she can finally analyze her choices from an outer perspective, which may help her to better define her actions and eventually become a full-fledged adult. (Keith 65)

Before the narrative shifts to third person, Marian claims that she "must get organized" and she "[has] a lot to do" (126). This undoubtedly shows that Marian has finally decided to come to terms with what is happening in her life and with what she needs to do. At the beginning of the second part Marian is sitting at her desk and contemplates her new attitude:

> Around her the office was in a turmoil. . . . She used to feel a sense of participation in the turmoils themselves; once or twice she had even allowed herself to become frenzied in sympathy, and had been surprised at how much fun it was; but ever since she had become engaged and had known she wasn't going to be there forever (. . .), she had been able to lean back and view them all with detachment. In fact, she found that she couldn't become involved even when she wanted to. (130)

Significantly, after her engagement with Peter, she has lost interest in anything and has detached herself from other people and external situations. Although three months have passed,

she has not told anyone about the engagement, except for Ainsley, which may be a signal that probably she is not that happy about her upcoming wedding after all.

The turning point of the novel is to be found in chapter thirteen. Marian is lunching out with her colleagues. Millie chooses "steak-and-kidney pie", Emmy orders "a salad with cottage cheese" and Lucy "ask[s] for an omelette" (135). Marian, who "had been dying to go for lunch" and "[had been starving" (135) all day, now is not hungry anymore. This is the moment in which Marian's relationship with food becomes problematic. In chapter seventeen Marian and Peter are at a restaurant and food is served. When Marian looks at Peter cutting his *filet mignon*, she conceives the action as pure violence. This thought triggers other non-pleasant ones: she is reminded of a piece of news in the newspaper about a "young boy who had gone berserk with a rifle and killed nine people before he was cornered by the police" (184), a scene of intense and apparently groundless violence. Once again, she compares Peter's way of eating and cutting the food to an operation, as she claims that he is "operating on the steak . . . carving a straight slice and then dividing it into neat cubes" (184). While witnessing this horrible scene, she starts imagining

> rows of butchers somewhere in a large room, a butcher school, sitting at tables, clothed in spotless white, each with a pair of kindergarten scissors, cutting out steaks and ribs and roasts from the stacks of brown-paper cow-shapes before them. (185)

Once she looks down at her plate, she cannot see her steak as food, but as "a hunk of muscle. Blood red" (185). In short, what she sees is a dead animal, which once was alive and healthy. She cannot but consider herself a killer in that precise moment, just like the Surfacer while contemplating the dead body of the heron. She compares the picture of a dead cow in her head to the "pre-packaged" meat of the supermarket "with name-labels and price-labels stuck

on it" (185). Suddenly, she feels that she cannot eat anymore and turns pale. Once again, she tries to rationalize the situation by saying to herself, "everyone eats cows, it's natural" (185). Nonetheless, she cannot keep eating. In the next chapter readers get to know that Marian has not been able to eat a pork chop, a planned sheep and a pig. She discovers that she cannot eat anything with a bone, tendon or fibre, but has no idea where this decision comes from. Instead, she is able to eat hot-dogs, hamburgers or pork sausages, only if she does not look at them too closely. She starts developing the fear that the "refusal of her mouth to eat [is] malignant" (187) and that it could spread to her whole body, leading her to vegetarianism. The morning after Marian learns that meat is not the only food "forbidden" to her, but there are more: for example, she can no longer eat eggs. While at the supermarket and picking through the vegetables, she wishes she could become carnivore again. She recalls the Christmas dinner with her family: she had pretended she was not hungry, but then, unseen, she had eaten huge quantities of cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes and mince pie. While planning the dinner party with Clara and Joe, she starts worrying about the menu and decides to go for a casserole. As the days go by, Marian becomes "more and more irritated by her body's decision to reject certain foods" (219). Suddenly, she comes to the conclusion that it must have been an ethical solution, but immediately rejects this option, when she discovers that carrots are also "forbidden". In chapter twenty-one Marian, whom Duncan's roommates have invited to dinner, tells Duncan about her eating problem, which she still cannot understand. However, he does not seem to worry about it and assures her that probably she is "the representative of modern youth, rebelling against the system" (236). At dinner, as she discovers that she cannot eat most of the foods served, Marian starts throwing pieces of meat to Duncan across the table. She does not

know it yet, but his analysis of the disturbance in her eating behavior was totally right. The day after Valentine's day Marian's body rejects rice pudding. Since the problem aroused, Marian "had been trying to pretend there was nothing really wrong with her" and that "it would go away" (253), but, actually, it only gets worse. What bothers her the most is that "she might not be normal" and that Peter "might think she [is] some kind of freak" (253). When she finds the courage to tell Clara, the latter assures Marian that she is "almost abnormally normal" and she will "get over it" (256). Although the protagonist thinks Clara is wrong, she feels a little bit reassured by her words. Peter will tell her that she is "marvellously normal" (257) but she, not yet convinced by his statement, decides to take a test: if Peter does not eat the Valentine's Day cake which she was unable to eat, then she would be sure that she is normal. But unfortunately for Marian, Peter does not "seem to notice anything odd about the cake" (259) and eats it without any problem.

Although Marian does not grasp the reason behind her eating problem throughout most of the novel, critics have been trying to give several interpretations to the response of her body to food. The most common one shows that Marian displays symptoms of anorexia nervosa. Indeed, she gradually stops eating and starts taking vitamin pills, she constantly worries about cooking, menus or meals, she is always tired, has a weak sense of identity and low self-esteem, she is very introspective and has a distorted vision of herself, as she sees "her body as a reflected image of the desires of others"; in short, she is an observer rather than a participant of life. (Gautam, "Female Self-enslavement" 706) However, it is important to point out that Marian's anorexia nervosa is much different from the one that usually affects many young women. Although the eating disorder Marian suffers from displays symptoms which are very

close to anorexia nervosa, she does not lack a desire to eat. She does not decide to starve herself because she wants to conform to the image of the ideal woman, but it is actually the opposite. Indeed, in *The Edible Woman* "anorexia is a form of protest at the social meaning of the female body. Rather than seeing it simply as an out-of-control compliance with the current patriarchal ideals of slenderness, it is precisely a renunciation of these 'ideals'" (Grosz 40). Basically, Marian's non-eating symbolically represents the denial of the model of femininity offered and promulgated by society. As the illness progresses, Marian experiences a split between mind and body. Gradually, she starts dissociating from her own body, which now functions as a separate entity. Indeed, when she is sitting at the table with Peter, Len and Ainsley, she cannot even realize that she is crying until she sees a teardrop on her hand. Her decision to rebel is actually not a real decision yet, but it is her subconscious which makes her act "abnormal", as Marian is still unaware of what is happening inside her body.

On the one hand, Marian's experience with anorexia nervosa shows the limits and weaknesses of women living in a patriarchal society, since Marian's "subconscious choice" of non-eating indicates her powerlessness as she lets Peter decide for her what to eat. But on the other hand, her problematic relationship with food eventually allows her to regain possession of and control over her body, dictate her own rules and develop a strong sense of identity (Gautam, "Female Self-enslavement" 706 – 707). Her seeming anorexia nervosa is the means through which the protagonist will eventually awake to a new life with a new identity of her own. Marian constantly fears that she is dissolving, "coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle" (274), and that she is being consummating. As she lies in the tub in chapter twenty-five, she notices a reflection in the two taps and spout. She then realizes that

those distorted forms belong to her own body. When she gets out of the tub, she puts on her ring, wrongly thinking that her marriage could protect her from dissolving any further. However, as her illness evolves and she grows more and more conscious everyday, she understands that her marriage with Peter is not what keeps her together, but rather the main cause of her dissolution.

Throughout the whole novel Marian is affected by never-ending feelings of paranoia and anxiety. For example, during the Christmas party she gets scared by a scene that she imagines in her head. As she sees all other women around her eating, she thinks of them as

> attached by stems at the tops of their heads to an invisible vine, hanging there in various stages of growth and decay… . . . What peculiar creatures they [are]; and the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potato chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears, and garbage. (205)

After a while, she realizes that she is exactly like all those women being consumed and eaten alive by society's absurd expectations. As already noted before, Marian experiences a split between mind and body, as "both [her] body and [her] feelings . . . have gained autonomy from her conscious intentions" and she "will continue to behave in an erratic manner until she acknowledges and integrates them" (Chernin 67). As Chernin claims, only when Marian is able to reconnect mind and body, she can reclaim the power to tell her own story and take control of her life; in short only when she acknowledges what her body is doing and why, she can finally return to a first person narrator. Feeling like constantly dissipating and completely powerless, Marian behaves as if she was not a human being per se, but acts as if she was just a projection of other people's desires.

The breakdown which the protagonist of *Surfacing* goes through is completely different in its development and, probably, psychologically more complex than Marian's. Indeed, it is not really easy to identify when the Surfacer's mental health starts deteriorating. In contrast to *The Edible Woman*, in *Surfacing* the protagonist's experience with madness is mainly a direct consequence of her past trauma, in addition to being triggered by her status as victim in society. Throughout the whole novel the narrator tells the readers about her previous marriage and divorce. But at a certain point in the book the audience finally learns the truth: she never married, but had an illegitimate relationship with her art professor and she never gave birth to a child, but had an abortion. Probably the readers start noticing something wrong with the Surfacer in chapter nine. Just like Marian, the Surfacer is troubled and struggles with the binary view according to which body and head are disconnected and harshly criticizes the patriarchal society's insistence that female bodies are entirely separated from their true inner selves. She is fully aware of the fact that head and body are strictly connected and that it is the neck which "creates the illusion that they are separate" (95). Although in *Surfacing* the reason behind the protagonist's breakdown lies in her experience with the abortion, something that Marian has no knowledge of, both women equally experience a sense of discomfort and detachment from everything. Indeed, the Surfacer, just like the female protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, feels detached, numb and close to dissolution:

> I'd allowed myself to be cut in two. Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate, wearing a bathing suit, smiling, a trick done with mirrors, I read it in a comic book; only with me there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb. At school they used to play a joke, they would bring little boxes with cotton wool

> in them and a hole cut in the bottom; they would poke their finger through the hole and pretend it was a dead finger. (138)

The fact that she feels “cut in two” or “nothing but a head” is undoubtedly a reference to her traumatic experience with the abortion procedure that keeps haunting her all along. As her sense of identity gets weaker, the Surfacer feels extremely powerless and believes that her body is close to a total fragmentation, which is something both protagonists fear. In the second part of the book, starting from chapter nine, the protagonist’s feelings of paranoia and anxiety are finally displayed:

> I'm not sure when I began to suspect the truth, about myself and about them [Joe, Anna and David], what I was and what they were turning into. Part of it arrived swift as flags, as mushrooms, unfurling and sudden growth, but it was there in me, the evidence, only needing to be deciphered. From where I am now it seems as if I've always known, everything, time is compressed like the fist I close on my knee in the darkening bedroom, I hold inside it the clues and solutions and the power for what I must do now. (95)

She starts believing that “the island [is not] safe” anymore and they “[are] trapped on it” (96). She explicitly claims that she is uneasy. Her paranoia increases more and more, as she feels “the sense of watching eyes, his presence lurking just behind the green leafscreen” (96). It is not clear whom the adjective “his” might refer to, but it is very likely that she is talking about her father, about whom she still does not know anything. In chapter nine she begins to suspect about Joe, Anna and David. She perceives her friends’ laughter as “canned laughter, they carry it with them, the midget reels of tape and the On switch concealed somewhere in their chests, instant playback” (96). At a certain point in the novel the Surfacer is convinced that the three of them are all traitors, trying to make fun of her. When they reveal that her father has been found dead, she feels betrayed and manipulated, as she thinks that he is still alive and

that they have conspired against her. As a consequence, she does not trust them anymore. “They're avoiding [her], they find [her] inappropriate; they think [she] should be filled with death” (203) is what she believes. She imagines David and Anna are “turning into metal, skins galvanizing, heads congealing to brass knobs, components and intricate wires ripening inside” (203).

Nonetheless, the narrator tries to “keep busy, preserve at least the signs of order, conceal [her] fear” (97), thus not revealing her true feelings. By comparing fear to love, she conveys a rather cynical but reasonable message, if we take into consideration that in the novel love is nothing but possession and manipulation. “Love is taking precautions” (100), claims the Surfacer. When the protagonist hears Anna have sex with Joe, she wishes that she shut up and, significantly, she compares sex to death, conceiving it as “pure pain, clear as water” (104), just like Marian compares the bathtub where she is having sex with Joe to a coffin.

The climax of the novel is undoubtedly to be found in chapter seventeen. In chapter six, while the Surfacer is looking through her father’s things, she finds out that he used to spend his time in the cabin making “unintelligible drawings” (72). The narrator cannot make sense out of her father’s drawings which display “a hand, done with a felt pen or a brush, and some notations: numbers, a name”, “a stiff childish figure, faceless and minus the hands and feet” and, on the next page, a “creature with two things like tree branches or antlers protruding from its head” (72). In chapter twelve, while she “[rummages] in the cavity under the wall bench, [goes] through the shelves, [gropes] under the beds” to search for her father’s will, she is reminded of his “lunatic drawings”, which may reveal important information about him (128). While reading some letters that were once addressed to him, she finds out that his drawings are

not original, but copies of some Indian rock paintings. Now that she has the proof that he did not go mad, she finally acknowledges that he must be dead. However, when she gives a look at the numbers on the drawings once again, she learns that they are nothing but "a system, a game" (132) and decides that she wants to solve the riddle her father has left to her, because this would make him less dead. On one drawing she recognizes the name of White Birch Lake, where she and her friends go fishing. When she takes a look at the map in Anna's and David's room, she notices that there are "a tiny red x and a number, identical with the number of the drawing" and "scattered here and there [are] others xs, like a treasure map" (133). In chapter seventeen, determined to verify whether her father's paintings match the original ones, the Surfacer leaves the cabin and dives into the lake. While she is under water, she sees her father's body, which she mistakes for her aborted child:

> It was there but it wasn't a painting, it wasn't on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead. . . . I lay on the bottom of the canoe and closed my eyes; I wanted him not to be there. It formed again in my head: at first I thought it was my drowned brother, hair floating around the face, image I'd kept from before I was born; but it couldn't be him, he had not drowned after all, he was elsewhere. Then I recognized it: it wasn't ever my brother I'd been remembering, that had been a disguise. I knew when it was, it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills, I couldn't let it out, it was dead already, it had drowned in air. It was there when I woke up, suspended in the air above me like a chalice, an evil grail and I thought, Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it. (182)

The dive, which is also a psychological plunging into the Surfacer's past, brings to light her long-repressed memory of the abortion. This moment is highly significant and represents the turning point in the novel, as she finally reveals that everything she has been telling all

along was just “a different version” she had made up in her head, because she “couldn’t accept it, that mutilation” (183). Finally readers get to know that the wedding day was actually the day she underwent the abortion procedure, the day “they had planted death in [her] like a seed” (184). The vision underwater, which has opened her eyes to the truth, leads her to let go of the lie she has created to protect her integrity. As the truth finally lies in front of her, the Surfacer can see things and define her feelings more clearly: “I didn't love him [Joe], I was far away from him, it was as though I was seeing him through a smeared window or glossy paper; he didn't belong here” (187). Recalling the “incident” starts off a stream of enlightening thoughts. She finally realizes that, in order to free herself of her guilty complex and become a new and free member of society, she has to face her long-repressed past. Through the complex journey she undertakes, the Surfacer can finally get over the intense psychological trauma of the abortion, which was what has made her feel “emptied, amputated” (184). It is precisely the rebirth which she experiences through the plunge in the lake, which makes her awakening to a new life possible. The revelation she gets from the dive is enlightening: now she knows that she cannot escape anymore and she must face up to her own responsibilities. Eventually, she learns that in order to fulfill the empty void left by the abortion and, thus, achieve wholeness, she needs to get close to nature. (Kalpakli 796)

Throughout the whole novel the protagonist feels powerless and looks for power everywhere. Suddenly, on the same day the Surfacer is told by her friends that her father has been found dead, she finds her mother’s gift under the mattress together with other scrapbooks: “the gift itself was a loose page, the edge torn, the figures drawn in crayon. On the left was a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out. Opposite

her was a man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail" (202). To understand the true meaning of that pictograph, she knows that she needs to "immerse [herself] in the other language" (203), the feminine one, not the one she has been taught by society all along. Her mother's gift is extremely important as it will lead her to have sex with Joe in the forest, during which she believes she gets pregnant. The conception, which is possible only because she is finally acknowledging the death of her child and is ready to mourn the loss, may be considered a way to fulfill the void left by the abortion. Indeed, as Niederhoff claims, "the ghost of this child [the aborted baby], who has led an uncanny and ghoulish life in the narrator's distorted memories, must be laid to rest before it can be reborn" (n.p.). Significantly, the second part of the novel ends with the Surfacer's observation that she "should be in mourning. But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive" (203), as she is determined to get pregnant again. The narrator's sexual intercourse with Joe marks her will to finally assert herself and her power. She decides to have sex in the forest, because that is the right way she can get close to the wholeness she is looking for. The sexual intercourse is a fundamental part of the protagonist's healing process. She wants the newborn to be a substitute of her dead child, whose death she has finally acknowledged, thus overcoming the guilty complex which has haunted her for a long time:

> I guide him into me, it's the right season, I hurry. He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds. This time I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone; or on leaves, dry leaves, a heap of them, that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it

> any words. I press my arms around him, smoothing his back; I'm grateful to him, he's given me the part of himself I needed. I'll take him back to the cabin, through the force that presses in on us now like deep sea on a diver, then I can let him go. (209)

The sexual intercourse marks the moment in which the physical transformation of the Surfacer gradually starts taking place, a transformation which makes her regress to an animal state. In order to achieve that state, she needs to get rid of all "trappings of civilization" (Dawson n.p.) which include social norms and, especially, male construction of femininity. While her friends are preparing to leave for the city, she obviously cannot, because her transformation process has not come to conclusion yet. To prevent her friends' interference with the procedure, she bolts into the forest. Once in the woods she starts becoming one with nature. She goes "along near the trees, boat and arms one movement, amphibian" and as "the land bends", she bends with it. Later, she "lie[s] down on the bottom of the canoe and wait[s]. . . .to make sure they [her friends] leave with him [Evans] as they should" (216), so that the process can finally start.

Anxiety and paranoia manifest themselves once again, as she tries to imagine what her friends will tell Evans. "They will be plotting, a strategy for recapture", she thinks (218). When Anna and Joe shout her name, she claims, "I no longer have a name" (218): the transformation process into a natural woman is underway. After checking whether they have really left, she heads to the cabin. The last section of the novel, which is told by a wild and filthy narrator, is completely surreal. She is aware that everything is absurd, but she also knows that "there are no longer any rational points of view" (219), as she has left rationality and "normality" back in the city with the old victimized version of herself. Once inside the cabin, she sits at the table and flicks through an old magazine picturing "shepherds knitting their own socks, weather

gnarling their faces, women in laced bodices and red lipstick balancing washing baskets on their heads, smiling to show their teeth and happiness" (222). Significantly, the image of the "perfect woman" wearing red lipstick and a bodice is exactly what she is rejecting by choosing to stay on the island and allowing herself to get rid of anything man-made. She decides that "the knife and the bowl . . . aren't needed, fingers will do" (222), when looking for something to eat out in the garden. Inside, she starts a fire and cooks the food but she feels that "there's no reason to set out plates", as she is going to "eat from the pot and the frying pan with a spoon" (224). She refuses to eat canned and prepackaged food, which belongs to the civilized world, but instead goes for "green peas out of their shells and the raw yellow beans" (231). She "scrape[s] the carrots [directly] from the earth" (231) and destroys crockery and books. The protagonist chooses to sleep "like a cat" in "a lair near the woodpile" (231) and, later, takes off her clothes to achieve complete purification. She cannot stand anything artificial, just like Marian is sickened at the sight of her fake look at the beauty salon. After taking her ring off, a symbol of her will not to be confined and victimized any longer, she drops it into the fire, just like all "artifacts" her eyes meet, because, as she brazenly claims, "everything from history must be eliminated" (229). She even rejects objects belonging to the civilized world, which she once used in her daily life:

> when I pick up the brush there is a surge of fear in my hand, the power is there again in a different form, it must have seeped up through the ground during the lightning. I know that the brush is forbidden, I must stop being in the mirror. I look for the last time at my distorted glass face: eyes lightblue in dark red skin, hair standing tangled out from my head, reflection intruding between my eyes and vision. Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it's toward the wall, it no longer traps me, Anna's soul closed in the gold compact, that and not the camera is what I should have broken. (227)

By refusing to use the brush and look in the mirror, the Surfacer is rejecting the male construction of femininity. Significantly, now that she is coming to terms with her past and that her weak sense of identity is getting stronger and stronger, she is finally able to cry for the first time. Earlier, her passivity and numbness made her estranged and alienated from anything and anyone, thus not allowing her to express her feelings. While in *The Edible Woman* the episode when Marian cries signals her alienation from her own body, as she is not able to recognize her tears falling down her cheeks until she sees her hand wet, the Surfacer cries once she is finally coming to terms with her painful past. Nonetheless, in both cases the two female protagonists' crying may be considered a small step towards freedom, as in *The Edible Woman* the tears, which significantly are followed by Marian's flight, are a signal that her subconscious is rebelling against Peter's monopolizing attitude, while in *Surfacing* the narrator's tears are a symbol of her growing awareness and ability to deal with her past. Once everything has been destroyed, she heads to the shore and lies on the surface of the lake and "cleans herself up", thus performing a purifying rite:

> I pile the blanket on the rock and step into the water and lie down. When every part of me is wet I take off my clothes, peeling them away from my flesh like wallpaper. They sway beside me, inflated, the sleeves bladders of air. My back is on the sand, my head rests against the rock, innocent as plankton; my hair spreads out, moving and fluid in the water. The earth rotates, holding my body down to it as it holds the moon; the sun pounds in the sky, red flames and rays pulsing from it, searing away the wrong form that encases me, dry rain soaking through me, warming the blood egg I carry. I dip my head beneath the water, washing my eyes. Inshore a loon; it lowers its head, then lifts it again and calls. It sees me but it ignores me, accepts me as part of the land. When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges gently against the dock. (230)

Of course by saying “clean”, she means purified, free from anything belonging to the city. Now she is more determined than ever to live according to her own rules and nature’s only. By letting go of her “false body”, she is rejecting society’s construction of femininity and absurd norms apt to control and limit women. In chapter twenty-two the Surfacer cries for the first time and finally accuses her parents for having left and “set up this barrier” (223). Of course, her journey towards self-realization and maturity cannot achieve completion without a reconciliation between parents and daughter. Therefore, she starts shouting in the hope that they would show up:

> “Here I am,” I call. “I'm here!” Voice rising and rising with the frustration and then the terror of hearing no answer, the time we were playing after supper and I hid too well, too far away and they couldn't find me. The treetrunks are so much alike, the same size, the same colour, impossible to retrace the path, instead locate the sun, the direction, whichever way you go you're bound to hit water. The dangerous thing is to panic, to walk in circles. “I'm here!” But nothing happens. (223)

As already noted in the previous chapter, the narrator’s relationship with her parents, especially with her father, has always been rather complicated. Therefore, the meeting is apt to reconcile the female protagonist with her distant parents, thus allowing her to resolve their long-lasting conflict and eventually accept their passing. Throughout chapters twenty-two and twenty-three the Surfacer becomes increasingly aware of the presence of her mother and father: “They’re here now, I can sense them waiting . . . they are pulling against me but I can make them come out, from wherever it is they are hiding” (223). Undoubtedly, at this point in the novel, her insanity is tangible, but readers soon understand that the breakdown she is suffering is of a cathartic type.

The protagonist knows that there are some places she can go and others she cannot. She is fully aware that she must follow those rules in order to meet her parents and that this encounter is necessary for her to come to terms with her past once and for all. Once having got over it, she will be able to become an adult with a new consciousness. At the beginning of the book she claims that “they all disowned their parents long ago, the way you are supposed to” (16), speaking of her friends. As the novel unfolds, readers understand that the narrator is equally guilty. For example, when she visits her terminally ill mother at the hospital, she tells her that she will not attend her funeral. “I was never good at them”, she admits (16). The Surfacer claims that her parents “never forgave [her], they didn't understand the divorce”, adding that they never “even understood the marriage, which wasn't surprising since [she] didn't understand it [herself]” (32). Later, she confesses that what they really could not overlook was the fact that she had left her child, “that was the unpardonable sin” (16). Of course, now that the audience finally knows the truth, it is obvious that all the memories she has recalled about her parents are partly fake, as she has neither left her child nor married. However, the long period of separation and estrangement from her parents, which the narrator must now compensate by meeting them, appears to be reality. Although the memories may be considered pure fabrications, her mother’s and father’s reaction to the abortion and illegitimate relationship might have been similar to the one the narrator has recalled. The Surfacer knows that she needs to go through some rituals to see her parents once again and thus resolve the whole unpleasant situation. Finally, she understands that there is only one rule which she needs to stick to: “they can't be anywhere that's marked out, enclosed” (234). Indeed, enclosed spaces belong to the civilized world, to the city, while her mother and father, in order to be summoned

up, have to be surrounded by nature. She realizes that, if she wants to talk to them, she needs to "approach the condition they themselves have entered" (234), thus rejecting anything man and progress have built. The Surfacer has never been able to accept her parents' death, as demonstrated by the following quote in chapter one:

> They have no right to get old. I envy people whose parents died when they were young, that's easier to remember, they stay unchanged. I was sure mine would anyway, I could leave and return much later and everything would be the same. I thought of them as living in some other time, going about their own concerns closed safe behind a wall as translucent as jello, mammoths frozen in a glacier. All I would have to do was come back when I was ready but I kept putting it off, there would be too many explanations. (5)

She admits that she has been a coward, as she confesses that she "would not let them into [her] age, [her] place", thus recognizing that she "must enter theirs" now (229). As she is waiting for her parents to come back, her transformation into an animal progresses: she lets her "fur" grow, she eats raw vegetables and gets naked. What's most significant is that she also rejects language, the masculine tool *par excellence*, claiming that she has no intention to teach her newborn how to speak either, since she knows that language is one of the means through which society oppresses women. "The animals have no need for speech" (236), she says. The Surfacer is turning into "the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow . . . a place" (236), finally reaching the wholeness she has been searching all along. By stripping herself of anything fake and artificial, she is reestablishing a bond with nature, thus becoming one with it.

As Burkhard Niederhoff claims, to reestablish a relationship with her parents, she needs to "pick it up at the point at which it ceased to develop", that is the time when she was a child; that is why she starts summoning them up by calling out their names, "as a lonely and frightened child would do" (n.p.). Finally, she sees the ghost of her gentle mother, "standing in

front of the cabin, her hand stretched out . . . she is turned half away from [her], [she] can see only the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding them [the jays]: one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder" (236). As soon as she sees her mother, the Surfacer understands that "she has been standing there all alone" (237): the mother looks and acts exactly in the same way she used to when she was alive. Suddenly, the narrator is struck by fear, as she starts thinking that maybe she is not real, that if she "blink[s] she will vanish" (237). The mother "turns her head quietly and looks at [her], past [her] as though she knows something is there but she can't quite see it" and, unexpectedly, "she's gone" (237). Once gone, the daughter goes up to where she was standing, contemplating the jays and thinking about which one her mother is, but "they hop, twitch their feathers, turn their heads, fixing [her] first with one eye, then the other" (237).

Before encountering the ghost of her father, her paranoia increases. She hears a powerboat coming. As she starts fantasizing, she grows more and more anxious:

> They may have been sent to hunt for me, perhaps the others asked them to, they may be the police; or they may be sightseers, curious tourists. Evans will have told at the store, the whole village will know. Or the war may have started, the invasion, they are Americans. (238)

The protagonist sees four or five people getting out of the boat but cannot see clearly who they are. She does not trust them, as if she were afraid that they might kill her, "if they guess [her] true form" (238). Of course, while she tries to overhear their conversation, she cannot recognize the language they are speaking "as any language [she has] ever heard or known" (239). The people who have come to catch her come from the city, they are a product of society, as the narrator sees "their false skins flapping" (240). Suddenly, thinking that they have heard her, she runs away and hides. Once back at the cabin, she finally sees her father,

“standing near the fence with his back to me, looking in at the garden” (242). Firstly, the Surfacer sees him in the shape of a wolf, gazing at her “with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes, depthless but lambent as the eyes of animals seen at night in the car headlights” (243). Surprisingly, as the narrator realizes that he “has nothing to tell [her], only the fact of itself” (243), she also learns that she “[does] not interest it, [she is] part of the landscape, [she] could be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock” (243). Then the father turns into a fish jumping from the lake, “carved wooden fish with dots painted on the sides, no, antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliffstone, protecting spirit” (243). Once he has left, the Surfacer places her feet in her father’s prints and, surprisingly, she discovers that they are her own.

As we can see, the albeit brief encounter with her parents brings benefit to the narrator. The emotionally broken daughter is able to get back in touch with her emotionally distant mother and also reconnects with her father. Now that she has finally met her parents, she can reconnect the two fragments, head and body that have been separated for so long; the mother represents the body, nature and spirit, while the father embodies the head, logic and rationality. By meeting them, she finally stops troubling herself with the notion that the neck “creates the illusion that they [head and body] are separate” (95).

After having resurrected her dead child and having had sex with Joe, the meeting with her parents is the ultimate significant step, which allows her to become an adult and independent woman with a stronger sense of identity. Once having met her parents, she can recognize their “right to get old” and finally accepts their death. Indeed, according to Niederhoff, the Surfacer’s mother and father have undergone two transformations: they turned into Gods providing their daughter with guidance, but then became human again to make sure

she accepted their death. After the encounter, in chapter twenty-six she finally dreams about them “the way they were when they were alive and becoming older” (245), showing how she is finally coping with her mother’s and father’s death. Now that she has finally accepted the death of her parents, as well as her baby’s, she will not be haunted by them anymore and she can finally move on.

All things considered, it can be stated that in both *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* the two female protagonists go through a very similar mental health crisis, as it is mainly triggered by their perpetual victimization in the patriarchal society. Given what has been said so far, it is undoubtedly undeniable that Marian and the Surfacer’s different experience with madness is “an unconscious form of feminist protest, the counterpart of the attack on patriarchal values carried out by the women's movement of the time” (Showalter 5), which, as the novel unfolds, becomes more and more conscious. Nonetheless, in *Surfacing* the mental breakdown the narrator goes through is psychologically more complicated to analyze, as it is triggered by multiple factors. While in *The Edible Woman* the reason why Marian develops a peculiar form of anorexia nervosa is basically her victim’s status in a strictly patriarchal society, whose absurd unwritten rules may be embodied by characters such as Clara or the office virgins, the reason behind the Surfacer’s breakdown is to be found somewhere else. It is true that she, just like Marian, has been oppressed and victimized by men, especially by her “fake husband”, David and Joe, but her status as victim of society is not the only factor that triggers her mental health crisis. The event that keeps haunting her throughout the whole novel and that finally she is able to confront is the forced abortion of her baby. Biroğlu thinks that the female protagonist of *Surfacing* might suffer from schizophrenia, as many symptoms displayed in the novel are

similar to the ones a schizophrenic usually shows: she is severely paranoid, suspecting of everyone and everything, she thinks others are plotting to hurt her and has several hallucinations (63). The most significant hallucination in the book is the little dead body of her aborted baby, which she sees while underwater. In both novels the subconscious plays a significant role. Even before Marian becomes aware of the external forces manipulating her, deep down she already knows that she is a victim. It is her subconscious that makes her stop eating, thus sending her a warning sign. That is why she initially cannot understand why she feels sick at the sight of food. As already noted before, Marian's subconscious is awakened by her meeting with the extremely self-centered Duncan. Although it is the narrator herself in *Surfacing* that, by plunging into the lake, awakes her consciousness and tells the readers the whole truth, the presence of the subconscious in the novel is equally strong and significant. For example, the image of the dead heron recurring throughout *Surfacing*, may embody her unborn baby, but could also represent her subconscious finally warning her about her victim's status in society. At the beginning of both books the two female protagonists think they are powerless as they feel like they are no human beings per se with independent rights, but just projections of others' desires and expectations. Indeed, they both leave others decide what is best for them. However, their powerlessness significantly embodies their resistance against patriarchy. Throughout their long journey towards self-discovery they both assert their power: in *The Edible Woman* Marian shows her strength by taking control over her body, while the Surfacer starts losing the "old belief that [she is] powerless" (249) while having sex with Joe, because she is the one to guide him into her, thus resolving to feel powerful again. Of course, they will achieve full awareness of their power only at the very end of the book. Despite having initially

stated that the narrator of *Surfacing* neither has nor needs a spiritual guide just like Marian, actually there is someone helping her. It is true that she is able to start the whole process on her own, but in order to complete the journey and eventually achieve self-realization, the presence and role of her parents is essential. Before seeing the ghosts of her parents, she is still a child, who must follow the rules they have made for her. Instead, once she has met them, she does not need rules anymore because she is ready to establish her own. The encounter is highly significant because it marks the moment in the novel when the Surfacer finally grows into an adult woman. Undoubtedly, her parents' help is less explicit than Duncan's, because the narrator of *Surfacing*, once her mother and father are gone, is left on her own to decide what to do next. Being her more experienced, the female protagonist does not need someone guiding her throughout her journey since the very beginning, but she requires someone who, towards the end, can point her in the right direction, allowing her to complete the transformation. Her mother, particularly, plays a significant role in her daughter's life, as can be grasped from a quote found in chapter nine:

> That was the picture I kept, my mother seen from the back, arms upraised as though she was flying, and the bear terrified. When she told the story later she said she'd been scared to death but I couldn't believe that, she had been so positive, assured, as if she knew a foolproof magic formula: gesture and word. (99)

The breakdown Marian and the Surfacer go through, which represents their own way to rebel against the oppressive authority and the communal notion of femininity, undoubtedly hurts and bothers the two protagonists: Marian is hungry and would like to have a normal meal, but she just cannot eat certain foods and she does not understand why until the end of the novel, while the Surfacer is in pain when she vividly sees her dead baby under water and must

confront her terribly painful past. However, if on the one hand dealing with any illness is definitely not pleasant at all, on the other, the breakdown the two female protagonists suffer is undoubtedly productive, as it leads them to reach self-awareness and makes their weak sense of identity stronger. The journey they undertake is painful, since it brings to light some memories, feelings or aspects that have been repressed or hidden all along, but it is essential to ensure that both Marian and the Surfacer will be able to live a life according to their own rules.

The next chapter, dealing with the third phase of the two protagonists' odyssey, will focus on their final realization about what has been happening in their lives. It will mark the conclusion of the two women's long-lasting journey and see them find their way back to reality in a way that may make readers question whether the breakdown has really been productive after all.

3.3

"Back to so-called reality"[10]: Marian's and the Surfacer's Process of Recovery

The ending of *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* mark the conclusion of Marian's and the Surfacer's journeys toward female emancipation. The third and last phase sees the two female protagonists realize that they are human beings per se, who can stand up for themselves and make their own decisions. By acknowledging this, they are able to regain their identity and achieve wholeness and integrity. The last chapters of *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* are quite similar in the way the two narrators emerge as more enlightened and knowledgeable adult women, having developed full awareness, which allows them to take charge of their life.

As already noted, during the party Marian imagines walking down a corridor and opening several doors to her future with Peter. The last door to be opened makes Marian panic, as she finds Peter who suddenly "[raises] the camera [in his hand] and [aims] it at her" with "his mouth opened in a snarl of teeth" (306). She screams and covers her face with her arm. Marian gets so scared by the image of Peter as a ferocious predator that she feels "she [has] to get out before it [is] too late" (307). As she hears Peter calling everyone in order to take a group portrait, she understands that she needs to hurry. Using her coat as "a protective camouflage that would blend her with the scenery" (307), she "[runs] as fast as she [can] down the hallway towards the stairs" (308) and finally finds herself outside. As she fears that Peter

10 Atwood, Margaret. The Edible Woman. Virago Press. 2009. p. 353.

might be following her, she can finally see him for who he really is: a "dark intent marksman with his aiming eye . . . waiting for her at the dead centre: a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands" (308). Having grasped the true nature of her future husband, Marian is determined not to "let him catch her this time" (308). Once she has sneaked away from the party, she heads to the laundromat in order to find Duncan, thinking that he is the only one who could bail her out. "He would know what to do" (307), she claims. While running along the snowy streets, anxiety shows up again:

> She slipped on a patch of ice and almost fell. When she had recovered her balance she looked behind. Nothing.
> 'Take it easy,' she said, 'keep calm.' Her breath was coming in sharp gasps, crystallizing in the freezing air almost before it had left her throat. She continued on, more slowly. At first she had been running blindly; now however she knew exactly where she was going. 'You'll be all right,' she said to herself 'if only you can make it as far as the laundromat.' (309)

As we can see, Duncan represents a safe haven for the protagonist. That is why she needs to "make it as far as the laundromat": to reach safety. "Maybe you want me to rescue you?" (312), Duncan asks Marian, once they meet at the laundromat. She proposes to spend the night together and, since he agrees, they start looking for "some sort of hotel" (313). However, once they find a room, Marian cannot help but think about Peter: "What am I doing here? How did I get here anyway? What would Peter say?" (317). On the one hand, by escaping from the party, it is clear that Marian is finally coming to terms with the unpleasant situation she has been trapped in for a long time, but on the other, the fact that she keeps worrying about Peter's opinions implies that she has not reached self-reliance yet. Before having sex, Duncan tells Marian to "peel that junk off [her] face" because he does not want to "come out looking like a

piece of flowered wallpaper" (319). The fact that he refuses to have sex with the "artificial" Marian signals, once again, that he is the only character who realizes how she has been constantly manipulated into looking like the "perfect woman" according to society's own standards. The sex-scene is extremely weird. "Well, what do we do now?" asks Duncan. "You must know", he continues (317). While Marian is thinking about what would Peter say about the situation, Duncan gets distracted by a large ashtray he found on the dresser. Marian cannot stand his uncaring attitude and prompts him to get into bed. She brazenly orders him to unzip her. At first, readers get the impression that the intercourse between the two is doomed to fail – "It's no use, I must be incorruptible" (319), says Duncan – as the young man appears awkward and clumsy. However, surprisingly, he soon strikes "her with his hand, gently, straightening her out, almost as though he was ironing her" and brazenly approaches her like "an animal, curious, and only slightly friendly" (321), taking control of the situation. The whole scene is comic, grotesque and eerie at the same time.

The next chapter opens with Marian and Duncan sitting at a coffee-shop, waiting for breakfast. When she looks down at the menu, she feels something move in her throat and realizes that she cannot eat anything. This is the moment in which her body has completely "cut itself off" (325). Although "last night everything [had] seemed resolved" (323), the following morning Marian is not so sure anymore. Since she is not ready to go back home and confront Peter once and for all, Duncan, hesitating, agrees to stay with her a little longer and they go for a walk. He takes her to "one of the ravines that [fissures] the city" (329). Marian gets scared by the impressive quantity of empty space underneath her. The white pit-bottom does not look solid to her, but "hollow, dangerous, a thin layer of ice, as though if you walked

on it you might fall through" (331) and she seems to realize that there is no certainty and that anything may suddenly break away. (Lilburn 95)

While they are sitting on the edge of a cliff, Duncan asks her why she cannot go back to Peter. "I mean, you are getting married and so on. I thought you were the capable type" (332), he claims. Marian's answer is quite revealing: "I am. I was. I don't know" (332). The old Marian, the one who cared about social conventions, seems to be gone; now she is rejecting marriage and all that comes with it, since she has finally figured out that the latter is nothing but an expedient to trap and manipulate women. Duncan is the only character in the book who realizes that Marian is not excited about her future with Peter, but at the same time he refuses to rescue her: "It's your own personal cul-de-sac, you invented it, you'll have to think of your own way out" (334). Indeed, although Duncan plays a significant role in leading the protagonist towards a full understanding of the social circumstances affecting her health, Marian eventually learns that she must rely on herself, and herself only, to get out of the situation. At this point in the novel, Duncan's function seems to be over. The fact that Marian leaves the ravine all by herself, determined to confront Peter, is undoubtedly a positive signal: she is taking responsibility and, most importantly, she is finally recovering. It is clear that Duncan, contrary to what Marian might have thought at the beginning, is not the answer to her problem. He provides neither protection nor salvation, but only helps her to realize that she cannot keep playing the escapist any longer.

Once at home, Marian receives a call from Peter. He is completely furious and this time he is the one losing control:

> Why the hell did you leave the party? You really disrupted the evening for me. I was looking for you to get you in the

> group picture and you were gone, of course I couldn't make a big production of it with all those people there but after they'd gone home I looked all over for you, your friend Lucy and I got in the car and drove up and down the streets and we called your place half a dozen times, we were both so worried. Damn nice of her to take the trouble, it's nice to know there are *some* considerate women left around… (337)

When Peter asks Marian about the "guy he [Trevor] was telling [him] about" (338), she remains vague on the subject. As she "hates talking about things like this over the phone" (338), Marian invites him over to her place. After taking a bath, she thinks of a way to avoid being "tangled up in a discussion" (339) with Peter. After writing a few words on her grocery list, she has an epiphany: she wants to bake a cake and offer it as a test to Peter. In the supermarket, while going through the aisles, "her image [is] taking shape" (339) and, once at home, she turns on the oven. Once she has taken the cake out of the oven to let it cool, she feels relieved that Ainsley is not home, because she wants to avoid "any interference with what she [is] going to do" (340). The decision to bake a cake is probably one of the few actions Marian performs of her own free will. Indeed, she has never done something simply because she wanted to, but because others pushed her to: for example, she was not interested to go to the beauty salon, on the contrary, that kind of environment made her feel quite nervous and uncomfortable, but she went anyway to please her fiancé. When the cake has cooled, she begins to "operate" (341) and give it a woman-shape. Once again, there is a reference to a hospital operation. However, while at the salon Marian was the one getting operated, in this scene she is the one doing the operation. Finally, looking down at her own creation, she can see "its face doll-like and vacant except for the small silver glitter of intelligence in each green eye" (342). The woman-cake, who functions as her own substitute, seems to represent the ideal

woman according to society: dumb enough to be manipulated and subjugated. It represents the woman, whom Peter has wanted all along. While contemplating the cake, she claims: "You look delicious… and that's what will happen to you; that's what you get for being food" (342). She feels sorry for a moment, knowing that it will end up being consumed, but she cannot do anything about it, then she hears Peter's footsteps approaching.

Suddenly, Marian has "a swift vision of her own monumental silliness, of how infantile and undignified she would seem in the eyes of any rational observer" (343). Just like W. J. Keith claims, Marian initially thinks of Peter as a "rational observer" (99):

> Now that she had seen him again, the actual Peter, solid as ever, the fears of the evening before had dwindled to foolish hysteria and the flight to Duncan had become a stupidity, an evasion; she could hardly remember what he looked like. Peter was not the enemy after all, he was just a normal human being like most other people. She wanted to touch his neck, tell him that he shouldn't get upset, that everything was going to be alright. (343)

Nonetheless, Marian does not let Peter's normal appearance rip her off. Indeed, immediately afterwards, she informs the readers that "there was something about his shoulders . . . It was easy to see him as normal and safe in the afternoon, but that didn't alter things" (343). While he is waiting for Marian in the living room, she goes to the kitchen, takes the cake and places it in front of him, saying:

> 'You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you,' she said. 'you've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork,' she added somewhat prosaically. (344)

The test has officially begun: if Peter found her silly, then she would accept his own version of herself and "they would sit down and have a quiet cup of tea" (343). At the

beginning Marian seems rather convinced that he will laugh at her creation and, consequently, that everything will be alright. Unlike the first cake-test, with which Marian wanted to assure herself that she was normal, this one has the opposite function: in this case she wants to disrupt the notion of "normality", which she seemed to care a lot about earlier. But when Peter sees the cake for the first time, he does not smile, on the opposite, "his eyes [are] widened in alarm" (344). Roles here seem to be reversed. It is not the authoritarian and confident Peter who threatens the fragile Marian, but she is the one assuming control this time. Offering the cake as her substitute is an act of resilience and emancipation. As Peter is unable to comprehend the meaning of her baked woman, he quickly leaves, without eating any of it. Once he has gone, Marian can finally see his ex-fiancé's true nature once and for all, as she pictures him in her mind "posed jauntily in the foreground of an elegant salon with chandeliers and draperies, impeccably dressed, a glass of scotch in one hand; his foot was on the head of a stuffed lion and he had an eyepatch over one eye" (345). Significantly, right after Peter has left and after the couple has broken off their engagement, she feels extremely hungry and devours the cake. Ironically, when Ainsley arrives, she tells the protagonist: "You're rejecting your femininity" (345). Roles are reversed once again. "It's only a cake" (346), Marian replies, finally realizing that the kind of femininity her roommate has just evoked is nothing but a pure social construct. She has finally acknowledged the external forces manipulating her and all other women as well. On the contrary, Ainsley, the liberated anti-marriage feminist seems to have turned into a conventional woman. By eating the cake, that is by eating the stereotyped version of herself, Marian is proving that she is the consumer now and not the one being consumed, thus demonstrating that she is just as powerful as everybody else. Once she

becomes aware of society's subtle mechanisms to monopolize women and once she recognizes the effects of patriarchal dominance over them, she is finally free. Now that she has fully recovered from her long-lasting "coma", she is capable of thinking and taking decisions for herself. Through the account of Marian's recovery, Atwood wants to induce women "to assert their right to eat and re-inhabit their own bodies" and highlights "the necessity for all women to be able to stand up for themselves" (Royanian 6). Most importantly, through *The Edible Woman*, Atwood attempts to "expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women" (Bouson, "The Anxiety" 230). By devouring the cake, Marian asserts her power and finally accepts that she does not have to be defined by stereotypical standards anymore.

Part three, the shorter section of the novel, opens with the following sentence: "I was cleaning up the apartment" (349). The readers immediately notice a big change in the narrative voice: Marian is in control of her story again. While she is tidying up the apartment, Duncan calls and asks her what happened after she left the ravine. Marian's answer is short, but exhaustive: "I realized Peter was trying to destroy me. So now I'm looking for another job" (350). Finally, Marian has found a way out of the manipulative relationship she was victim of. She has broken off her engagement with Peter and, thus, finally got empowered. The fact that she has resumed the first person narration is very significant, as it implies that now she is the only one in charge of her own life and body and will not let anyone else control her. By reading her answer to Duncan's question, readers also grasp that she must have left her dead-end job at Seymour Surveys, which was another element that made her feel trapped. The final discussion which takes place at Marian's house is once again absurd. Marian's own analysis of the whole

situation does not seem to convince Duncan. He claims that the fact that Peter was trying to destroy her is "just something [she] made up" (353). He even suggests that it is Marian who tried to destroy him. The protagonist is startled by the young man's comment and even starts questioning her own actions. Even weirder is Duncan's final statement: "Maybe Peter was trying to destroy me, or maybe I was trying to destroy him, or we were both trying to destroy each other, how's that? What does it matter, you're back to so-called reality" (353). Readers have difficulty finding logic in Duncan's words, since they cannot understand what he believes and what the truth is; everything seems to have taken a weird turn. While earlier in the novel Duncan seemed to give a reasonable analysis of Marian's eating disorder, at the very end he appears to say nonsensical things.

Just like Marian learns that she holds enough power to take decisions for herself, the Surfacer discovers that she is fully capable to do the same. In chapter twenty-six readers understand that the Surfacer is recovering and willing to connect herself with society again. After meeting her parents, the protagonist of *Surfacing* has finally come to terms with their death and can eventually dream of them "the way they were when they were alive and becoming older" (245). Finally, she has accepted that "they have gone… back into the earth, the air, the water, wherever they were when [she] summoned them" (245). Once she has acknowledged their departure, she can move on with her life and see everything with more clarity: "I can remember him, fake husband, more clearly though, and now I feel nothing for him but sorrow. He was neither of the things I believed, he was only a normal man, middle-aged, second-rate, selfish and kind in the average proportions; but I was not prepared for the average" (246). Although she started rebelling from the very beginning, the impression is that

the Surfacer, just like Marian, has been stuck in an unpleasant relationship, two in her case actually, for a long time and that her passivity did nothing but worsen the situation. But once she recognizes the external forces manipulating her and finally accepts the loss of her parents and baby, time can finally move on for her too: “Soon it will be autumn, then winter; the leaves will turn by late August, as early as October it will begin to snow” (246). She can also analyze things more rationally, as her paranoid thoughts decrease significantly: she realizes that maybe the reason why the men in the motorboat came to the island was “not to hunt but to warn [her]” (246). The protagonist starts thinking about going back to the city, but this time she is willing to act and prevent people from treating her like an object. Just like Marian, she has acknowledged that she is an independent human being and that she can rely on herself, and herself only, since there are “no gods to help [her] now” (247). She also recognizes, just like Marian while looking down at the unstable white pit-bottom, that there is no certainty, no totality, “no total salvation” (247). She has finally reached full maturity, as she is willing to establish an emotional connection with her estranged parents. But most importantly, she looks in the mirror again. What she sees is “a creature neither animal nor human, furless, only a dirty blanket, shoulders huddled over into a crouch, eyes staring blue as ice from the deep sockets; the lips move by themselves” (248). As the Surfacer realizes that her reflection in the mirror fits the well-known stereotype of the madwoman, she fears that people might not understand that she is only a natural woman. That is because society wrongly thinks that a “natural woman” is “a tanned body on a beach with washed hair waving like scarves” (248). It is precisely by looking in the mirror that the protagonist realizes that the notions of femininity and normality are nothing but pure social constructs. She acknowledges that what she thought

was “sanity” is nothing but society’s definition of sanity: “someone to speak to and words that can be understood” (248).

The last chapter is certainly one of the most significant in the whole book. Finally, we have confirmation that the Surfacer has grown into an adult woman and has freed herself from social pressure: “This above all, to refuse to be a victim” (249). She rejects the belief that she is powerless, thus realizing that the power she has been searching all along in nature, gods and pictographs actually resides in her. Basically, she finally gains power, once she resolves that she is a human being per se and that her actions have consequences on others. She gets dressed again and thus “[re-enters] [her] own time” (249), that is, she is going back to normal. Of course returning to reality does not mean that she is willing to embrace society’s conventions once again. Indeed, as she has developed full consciousness and has grown into a matured woman, she is willing to rejoin community as a new, different and enlightened human being. Her maturity is mainly signaled by the realization that she cannot keep living as a “natural woman” in the woods forever, thus recognizing the need to go back to society. Earlier in the book the Surfacer falsely thought that by withdrawing from society she could regain her humanity, but now she learns that it is rather the opposite.

Having outlined the peculiarities of the last chapters of *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, several conclusions can be drawn. Marian’s process of recovery has many points in common with the Surfacer’s. First of all, the two female protagonists are both escapists, trying to break away from situations and avoid confrontations. For example, Marian escapes twice within a day: firstly, she starts running away from the hotel after overhearing Peter’s conversation with Len and, later, she sneaks away from Len’s house. Similarly, the Surfacer

avoids any contact with society, by choosing to stay in the woods and hide, thus eluding communication and experiencing total alienation. However, towards the end both protagonists gradually abandon their escapist attitude in favor of a more responsive one. They realize that they cannot keep hiding or sneaking away and understand that they need to confront situations, even if that hurts. “We can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other, the way it was before, we will have to begin” (250), the Surfacer says, while watching Joe from behind the trees in chapter twenty-seven. At the end of *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* the two female protagonists appear to be sending an important message to women all over the world: you need to act, if you want others to stop treating you as objects, because if you escape or accept the situation you live in, then you side with the oppressor. By portraying Marian’s and the Surfacer’s successful journeys from victimhood to female emancipation and empowerment, Margaret Atwood wants women to understand that if any act of patriarchal control can be learned and internalized, then it can, and must, be dismantled as well (Royanian 6). Once fully recovered and having restored balance, they rejoin society with a renewed awareness, since they now know what they want and, above all, do not want. By becoming aware of the external forces influencing their life and attitude, they can prevent the latter from hurting them any longer. They are able to create a new beginning and start living life on their own terms. Indeed, in the last part of *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* Marian and the Surfacer are the ones making decisions: Marian, whose attitude even turns out to be a bit threatening, chooses to confront Peter by baking a cake which functions as her own way to reject him as her future husband, while the Surfacer deliberately chooses to stay on the island all by herself and face her painful past.

As can be seen, the crisis Marian and the Surfacer go through lead to the same positive outcome: they emerge as enlightened and self-knowledgeable human beings. Although the protagonist of *Surfacing* started out as more experienced about society's subtle methods of monopolization and entrapment, the cathartic and productive breakdown the two narrators experience seems to help both in the same way. The two women, thanks to what they have been through in the past few months and years, have learned a lot about themselves and the people surrounding them and are certainly more prepared to deal with adversities. In short, it may be claimed that *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* eventually leave a message of hope, as they both end with the two female protagonists having finally recovered and rejected what used to make them feel trapped and in constant anxiety. However, since the two novels remain open-ended, they also leave space for doubt. The final ambiguity, which strongly characterizes the last part of Marian's and the Surfacer's journey into and out of madness, will be discussed in the next and last chapter of this final dissertation.

3.4

The Edible Woman and *Surfacing*: Have Marian and the Surfacer Really Made Any Progress?

As seen above, *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* have an open and unresolved ending, which makes their analysis more difficult. The two books seem to end rather positively: Marian and the Surfacer reject society's standards and finally get their identity back. However, since both endings are open, readers can only assume what will happen next and hope that the two protagonists will stand up for themselves from now on. Sadly, this hope seems to fade away, if we take a close look at the ending of both novels, especially *The Edible Woman*. Indeed, some passages make readers wonder whether the two female protagonists have really made any progress and to what extent they are truly free now. This final ambiguity is more visible in *The Edible Woman*, since Marian, who constantly doubts her own actions, eventually seems to be confronted with the same choices as the beginning and it is very likely that she is going to make the wrong decision once again, thus accepting another dead-end job and manipulative fiancé.

While at the ravine, Marian has a significant revelation. "In the snow you're as near as possible to nothing", claims Duncan (333). Marian is puzzled by his statement, as she cannot understand what this has to do with their current conversation. However, she soon grasps that, if she does not want to risk becoming one with the white snow and, thus, losing her identity

once and for all, she must take a stand and confront Peter. On the one hand, she appears very confident and determined to assert herself: “Now I’ve got to decide what I’m going to do” she claims, since she realizes it “[is] time for action” (334). However, on the other, right after she has stood up, “she [can] feel desperation returning in her, seeping through her flesh like the effects of a drug” (334). Despite her strong determination to change the difficult situation she is in, Marian is still reluctant to go home and confront Peter all by herself. She even asks Duncan whether he wants to accompany her and talk to him on her behalf. “I don’t think I can do it” (334), she claims.

Once at home and after baking the cake, readers get to know that Marian would be willing to accept Peter’s version of herself, in case he found her act silly. The fact that, after everything she has been through, she gives Peter another chance, implies that she is still depending on her fiancé’s emotions and opinions. As seen above, Peter does not understand the meaning of the cake and quickly leaves. However, the question remains: if Peter had found her act silly and had laughed at her creation, would she have rejected him anyway? Readers cannot know it for sure, but it is most likely, as she herself says so, that “they would sit down and have a quiet cup of tea” (343) and that she would have married him, as if nothing had happened. Furthermore, Marian, after having baked the woman-shaped cake, starts thinking about “how infantile and undignified” (343) she would seem. The fact that she keeps doubting her own actions and behavior may imply that she is still trapped in the expectations of society. During the final conversation between Duncan and Marian, the latter even starts questioning her own beliefs:

> “Peter wasn’t trying to destroy you. That’s just something you made up. Actually you were trying to destroy him.”

> I had a sinking feeling. “Is that true?” I asked.
> “Search your soul,” he said, gazing hypnotically at me from behind his hair. He drank some coffee and paused to give me time, then added, “But the real truth is that it wasn’t Peter at all, it was me. I was trying to destroy you.”
> I gave a nervous laugh. “Don’t say that.” (353)

Marian seems confused and does not know what to believe anymore. The fact that she questions her own conclusions simply because Duncan disagrees with her, implies that she still lets others’ opinions manipulate her. Readers find it difficult to believe in the possibility of a way out for the protagonist and start wondering whether she really got empowered and became self-reliant. The chance that Marian may still be a victim becomes real in the eyes of the audience.

At the very end of the novel Marian tells Duncan that she is looking for another job and, presumably, although she does not mention it, another boyfriend as well. This gives readers the impression that she is going to make the same mistakes of the past, since her relationship with Peter and dead-end job at Seymour Surveys were exactly what made her feel trapped and manipulated all the time. In the final confrontation between Marian and Duncan, the latter tells the protagonist that she is back to “so-called reality” and a “consumer” (353) again. This statement may suggest that Marian, who had been trying to escape society’s demands and expectations, actually ended up back right where she started, since she has reinserted into the machine of capitalism (Mouda 4). Duncan’s function, which seemed to be over earlier in the novel, actually comes in handy one last time, as he is warning Marian that she might return to the world of consumption, thus probably going back to being a victim of society’s injustices.

In short, one big doubt grips readers: has Marian achieved liberation from patriarchal society or not? Feminist critics are divided on this question. Many think that the woman-shaped cake is a strong symbol of emancipation. For example, Glenys Stow claims that the cake is a "symbol of the artificial womanhood which her world has tried to impose on her [Marian]" and that, by devouring it at the end, she "breaks out of the expected social pattern" (90). On the opposite, other critics such as Gayle Green think that although the cake is "a powerful symbol, a gesture of resistance to a system that would devour her, . . . it is difficult to see how this symbol will translate into action" (96). Indeed, although readers do not know exactly what will happen next, it is most likely that Marian will find another unpleasant job and manipulative fiancé. Atwood herself claims that her heroine's choices "remain much the same at the end of the book as they are at the beginning; a career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it" (Atwood 1998: 312, 313). Although the female protagonist seems more resolute than ever not be a victim or let others manipulate her any longer, her life seems to be as unstable and uncertain as it used to be at the beginning (Hobgood 1).

In *Surfacing* the protagonist finds herself in a similar situation. In the last chapter suddenly a boat comes: it is Joe. She seems happy that he is back to take her with him and starts questioning what he will offer her: "a new freedom?" (250). She is reconsidering the idea of going back with him, as they "can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other, the way it was before" (250). The Surfacer, who recognizes the need to confront and talk to him once and for all, resolves that she can trust him, since she comes to the conclusion that he is not an American, but just "half-formed" (251). Of course her choice to return to the city with Joe is highly questionable: how can he offer her "a new freedom"? How could she depend on

another human being again? Hadn't she become aware of her own power and worth? The fact that she recognizes the need to rejoin community may be considered a positive signal, as it implies that she has finally become a full-fledged adult. However, the fact that she is ready to commit to Joe again and wants to go back with him make readers wrinkle their nose, since, according to the audience, she should not even be considering this option after everything she has been through.

In both novels readers fear that the two protagonists will end up right back where they started and will reinsert into the patriarchal system as victims. However, the case of Marian seems much more troubling than the Surfacer's. In Marian there is very little progress: she asserts that she is looking for another job, and, presumably, another boyfriend. When talking about the ending of *The Edible Woman*, Atwood describes it as a "circle", since nothing seems to have really changed in Marian's life, suggesting that the protagonist might be stuck in a vicious cycle (Atwood in Sandler 14). Furthermore, as can be seen by analyzing Marian's behavior at the very end of the novel, she has not completely achieved independence from society's expectations, as she still doubts her own actions. "Will she let herself be fooled again?" is what readers may wonder. In *Surfacing* the ending is equally ambiguous, but more hopeful. The Surfacer seems determined not to depend on others anymore and willing to prevent Americans from doing any more harm: "They exist, they're advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied" (247). Passivity and numbness seem to be completely gone. Furthermore, she is determined to establish a different kind of relationship with Joe, one based on communication, rather than passive acceptance. The signs of self-doubt present in Marian at the end of *The Edible Woman*

are not to be found in *Surfacing*, except for a brief moment, which, however, may be read as a positive signal. As she is preparing to go back to the city with Joe, she hesitates: "I tense forward, toward the demands and questions, though my feet do not move yet" (251). The fact that her feet do not move may imply that she is determined to trust Joe once again, but not as gullibly as before. She wants to start over with him, but this time she is more prepared to face the difficulties and challenges that could arise in their relationship. As a more self-aware and self-reliant mature woman, she is willing not to repeat the same mistakes. However, readers cannot help but ask themselves: does committing to Joe one more time will make her a victim again and lead her to experience the same social alienation as the beginning? There is no answer to this question, but it is an option that cannot be excluded. Although *Surfacing* undoubtedly ends more optimistically than *The Edible Woman,* as the Surfacer appears to have benefited more from the mental deterioration she experienced, it certainly does not lack in ambiguity and pessimism. Indeed, according to some critics and Atwood herself, despite the fact that the Surfacer explicitly claims that she refuses to be a victim, it is very likely that she will always be one: "If you examine her [the Surfacer's] situation and her society in the cold light of reason, how is she going to avoid it [being a victim]?" (Atwood in Sandler 12). In short, although in *Surfacing* there is a glimmer of hope at the very end which is not present in *The Edible Woman*, the closure in both novels leaves readers doubtful and fearful of the future of the two protagonists, which is as uncertain as it was at first.

Nonetheless, it can be claimed that something has really changed in Marian and the Surfacer. It is completely true that they risk being engulfed by the manipulative patriarchal society once again and, thus, repeating the same mistakes as before, but, as they emerged from

the breakdown as more enlightened, knowledgeable and independent human beings, it is highly probable that they will face the same difficulties, only this time knowing that they hold enough power to overcome them. Indeed, although Marian and the Surfacer have not completely defined their identity yet, they are in the process of doing so and, most importantly, they know that they need to do so. It is very likely that they, Marian especially, will have to face the same difficulties as at the beginning, but what is important is that they have changed, they have acquired increased awareness of themselves and their power, which may help them to better deal with daily challenges and, hopefully someday, overcome them. Their experience with anorexia, schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder, however overwhelming and distressing, has been character-building and cathartic. The endings of *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* are undoubtedly ambiguous, leaving readers with a bitter taste and a sense of uncertainty, but also hope. Despite appearances, the progress has been great, since at the end of both novels "some kind of harmony with the world [is] seen as a possibility finally, whereas initially it is not" (Atwood in Gibson 27). Indeed, *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* may contain a plot where nothing really happens or changes, but the two female protagonists have undoubtedly evolved and transformed, as their experience with madness made them aware of their power and strength and prepared them to confront the oppressive nature of patriarchy.

Concluding Remarks

By analyzing and comparing Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, three main conclusions can be drawn. First of all, it may be concluded that Marian and the Surfacer experience an almost identical fragmentation of their identity. In fact, the two novels follow a very similar pattern made up of three stages, which has been analyzed in the third chapter. In the first place, this dissertation painted a despairing picture of female oppression and victimization, by providing significant excerpts from Atwood's books; indeed, initially, both protagonists are victims of the restraints imposed by society. In the second place, this work showed how the two female narrators are both driven mad by male dominance and gender oppression, thus gradually developing a peculiar form of anorexia nervosa, in the case of Marian, and schizophrenia, in the case of the Surfacer. Thirdly, this dissertation introduced a new version of the two protagonists, who have eventually developed self-awareness and reached emancipation, thanks to their experience with madness, which proved to be beneficial at last. Finally, the last section of the third chapter called into question everything that had been claimed before, showing that, after all, Marian's and the Surfacer's newly-achieved freedom is nothing but pure fantasy. By retracing the two protagonists' journeys towards self-reliance, it is possible to conclude that *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* are very similar in the way they portray a female character who, through different painful experiences, comes to learn about her worth and power, but whose newfound freedom is merely apparent.

As for the second question that has been raised at the beginning of the writing of this dissertation – which inquired whether madness is a product of patriarchy in Atwood's novels – the answer is that the appearance and development of anorexia nervosa and schizophrenia are closely linked to the two female narrators' inferior status in society. Of course, this theory stems from a close analysis of secondary sources, especially Showalter's *The Female Malady*, Chesler's *Women and Madness* and Ussher's *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience*, which, although rather old, provide a significant and truthful comment on how women are more likely to suffer from a mental illness than men and, most importantly, on how madness may often be considered "an unconscious form of feminist protest" (Showalter 5). This dissertation proved how *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* portray madness as a form of rebellion against female oppression, social conventions and, particularly, men. Indeed, the two women's discomfort with their inferior position, which initially manifests itself through the appearance of peculiar symptoms, such as Marian's desperate flight from Peter's oppressive presence or the Surfacer's urge to destroy *Random Samples*, representative of male power over women, soon turns into an actual breakdown. This work especially drew attention to Marian's and the Surfacer's signs of dissent and mental deterioration displayed in the two novels, which are extremely significant when analyzing their crooked journey towards emancipation. Through a close reading and analysis of Atwood's novels, especially focusing on Marian's and the Surfacer's gradual process of turning from victims into rebels and their apparently nonsensical behavior, it was possible to show how madness represented their own unconscious way to rebel against male dominance and, consequently, get their identity back.

Finally, the question of whether Marian and the Surfacer are actually free at the end of *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* has certainly been the most difficult to delve into. As can be seen by reading the last chapter of this dissertation, no final answer is given. Indeed, on the one hand, this work showed how a significant progress has been made by the two protagonists of both novels. Something within themselves seems to have changed for the better: they have found a way out of the manipulative relationships they were victims of, they are more aware of themselves and the outer world, they have finally realized that they are just as powerful as any other human being and are more prepared to deal with other adversities and challenges. However, although a change has definitely occurred within the two protagonists, the latter are still confronted with the same choices as they were at the beginning and, even though readers do not know for sure what will happen to Marian and the Surfacer once the novels are over, they have a bad feeling about it. In fact, the two books eventually provide so many ambiguities that it is legitimate to ask whether in the end the two protagonists are truly free. Although this work has not given a final answer to this question, since Margaret Atwood herself does not provide her audience with a solution either, it implied that the freedom and emancipation achieved by Marian and the Surfacer is not total at all.

Last but not least, it may be claimed that, by closely analyzing and comparing Atwood's works as *Bildungsroman*, this dissertation was mainly intended to draw attention to women's condition in the context of the American continent in the 1960s. Also, through the last disillusioned chapter, this work highlighted how women's freedom is often just an illusion and that, despite the achievements of feminism, the fight for women's equality has a long way to go (and probably it will never be achieved completely).

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Acknowledgements

Ringrazio la professoressa Pia Masiero per avermi seguita costantemente nella stesura di questo elaborato finale.

Ringrazio la mia famiglia, senza la quale tutto questo non sarebbe stato possibile.

Ringrazio mia sorella, l'unica certezza della mia vita.

Ringrazio Martina M. e Francesca F., le due persone più importanti che Ca' Foscari potesse regalarmi, che mi hanno supportata durante tutto il percorso universitario e con le quali ho condiviso momenti indimenticabili. Un ringraziamento speciale va, senza ombra di dubbio, anche a Francesca D.

Infine ringrazio tutte le mie amiche che, anche solo con una battuta o un sorriso, hanno reso le mie giornate più allegre. In particolare ringrazio Marta, la mia più grande amica, colei che mi supporta da sempre.