

# IMAGES OF WOMEN'S POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN FICTION BY WOMEN

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In 1972, Margaret Atwood's book *Survival* identified the victim as the typical Canadian character. Although "Miss Atwood's delightful doomsday book" (Gutteridge 39) has been labeled "a distorted view of our writing" (Fulford 30), "a vision that cannot be accepted in literal totality" (Woodcock 160), although critics have noted that "the themes Atwood finds to dominate the literature—victimization and survival—are two main themes of her own work, and have been in no way as important to other Canadian writers" (Davey 34), and although feminist criticism has moved away from emphasis on victimization, the power and influence of *Survival* should not be underestimated. Gutteridge noted in 1973 that its best-seller status and the critical attention it was being accorded made it "safe, and proper, to conclude that its underlying assumptions about the nature of Canadian society and literature are being taken seriously" (39), Fulford concluded that "... she has written a book that is at once searching and challenging, a book that forces the reader to think not only about the books of his country but about the environment that produced those books" (30), and Woodcock acknowledged that "... Atwood has indeed isolated a familiar Canadian syndrome" (160). Scott Symons's recent attack on "Atwood-as-Icon" notes that *Survival* made Atwood famous "and in effect provided us with a handbook on how to better our lot" (36). Whether or not the whole Atwood agenda is as perverse as Symons goes on to suggest, *Survival* did heighten consciousness of a non-trivial facet of much Canadian literature. Since *Survival's* publication in 1972, perhaps in reaction to Atwood's theory and no doubt in reaction to the feminist movement in general, an enhanced awareness of victimization and power has been reflected by many Canadian women writers

of fiction who have presented complex images of women as powerful. Among these images are: 1) traditional images of women's power such as costume and hairstyles, witchcraft, and children; 2) traditional images of men's power ascribed to women, including guns, knives, success in traditionally male occupations, sexual freedom, and masculine vocabulary; 3) fresh images of women's power including androgyny, freedom of choice, feeling and evoking strong emotions, and voicing one's own vision of the world, often in art.

To examine all such images would require a book at least as long as *Survival*, which, no matter how many literary works it considered, would still be open to the criticisms of omissions of the sort that were levelled at *Survival*. I have chosen here instead to consider images of power in the fiction of three important Canadian feminist writers, examining more than one work by each author to gain a clear understanding of what these three writers perceive about victims and power. Aritha Van Herk's novels *Judith* and *The Tent Peg* provide a definitive look at images of power as seen by a militant feminist in the late seventies and early eighties. Alice Munro's stories "The Beggar Maid" and "Simon's Luck" are contemporaneous with *Judith*, yet reveal a more understated feminist concept of women's power. Munro's "Lichen" appears in a collection published between the two novels by Margaret Atwood—*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Cat's Eye*—that are discussed in the final section of this paper. The sense of the cause of victimization in "Lichen" is less societal than that in Atwood's fiction, more inherent in the natural human condition, while its images of feminine power in creativity parallel images in these two novels by Atwood. By looking at these four novels and three short stories, we can begin to get a sense of how three of the definers of the collective consciousness perceive the progress—or lack of progress—away from victimization.

Aritha Van Herk's novels *Judith* (1978) and *The Tent Peg* (1981) present women who achieve power by adopting traditional symbols of men's power and then combining these with traditional symbols of women's power to create new images of power for women.

*Judith* draws on images from *The Odyssey* and *The Apocrypha* to depict a woman who is more capable than the men around her and yet is highly desirable sexually. Van Herk's *Judith* has given up her secretarial job, sexy wardrobe, and fashionable hairstyles

in order to fulfill her dead father's dream of running a pig farm. Judith does a man's job better than a man can do it when, dressed in "barn clothes" (181), frustrated that Jim's technique for castrating her piglets is "awkward and the cut was not clean and deep but a swipe at the surface nerves" (174), and upset at the "clumsy sawing cut that drew a shrill scream from the bottom of the piglet's throat" (174), she exchanges roles with him:

She reached out her hand, now sure and fearless, so perfectly knowing. "Give me that thing and you hold this pig down." . . . And she slipped them [the piglet's testicles] out of him so easily, so swiftly presiding over his emasculation like the savage witch of pragmatism that she was. (175)

Ironically, at the moment that Judith most clearly proves her ability to function better than a man in a traditional male role, Van Herk evokes the traditional sinister image of female power: the witch. The narrator, in one of the rare figurative statements in the novel, has already prepared us for this image by identifying the witch: "Not even Circe's turning men into swine could equal it [castration]" (173), and later emphasizes the image of Judith as castrating witch by referring to the piglets as "Circe's humans" (179). In *The Odyssey* the image of Circe is double; she uses her power to transform Odysseus's men: "For now to all appearance they were swine: they had pigs' heads and bristles and they grunted like pigs; but their minds were as human as they had been before the change" (162). The god Hermes warns Odysseus that he must bed Circe if he wishes to free his men, but warns him, "when she has you stripped she may rob you of your courage and your manhood" (163). However, after Odysseus succeeds in gaining the witch's favor, she not only releases his men but also provides good advice to aid Odysseus in his next two adventures.

Van Herk's use of the Circe image for Judith evokes both aspects of the image. Taking the knife, a traditional symbol of male power, from Jim and succeeding where he is inadequate, her power threatens Jim's masculinity:

Jim held them silently, sweating, his eyes averted from hers in some other icy cast of fear. She could almost have asked him to lie down on that bale, had she done it with the same coolness and finesse that she tackled them, she who had never before held that blade in her hand. . . . (176)

What threatens Jim liberates Judith. As she castrates the piglets, she comes to terms first with her city lover and the false image of femininity she had adopted to please him:

Perhaps it was atonement for the acts of barbarity she had committed on herself for him: plucking her sleek eyebrows, rolling her straight hair into curls, thrusting golden posts through the holes in her ears. Did all that and then resented his acceptance of it as his due, his casual, "You look lovely tonight, Judith." (175)

She also comes to terms with her need to please her father:

It mattered little whether he was alive or dead, she had to show him that she would hold herself for him, her father.

And now she had seen the core, the axis always unexplained and mysterious, more than a fusion of beginning and end, but the stuff that days and weeks and months are made of, the continual hard, resistant core. (178)

Having proven herself in the man's world, having rejected the false images of womanhood received from her city lover and her father, having looked into the mystery of life itself by cutting open the piglets' scrotums, Judith turns into the beautiful goddess Circe who can draw her Odysseus to her bed. She showers and dresses in her most feminine clothing; Jim returns without explanation, and she becomes utterly feminine: she cries. Their sexual encounter only takes place, however, after she has stated her equality by rejecting the typically feminine form of nicknaming by adding "y" to a shortened version of the first name, an ending which linguists have noted often occurs in baby talk (Frank and Anshen 22):

"Judy, shhh, listen, little girl, don't be so afraid all the time, you're safe now, my little Judy, shhh."

... "I'm not little. I'm twenty-three years old. And if you dare to call me Judy, you'll pay." (184)

Van Herk tells us that "There was something about denying her childishness that made it [sex] better than it had ever been" (184). Interestingly, however, the narrator precedes this statement with a curiously casual one: "And oh yes, it was very good" (184). Catching the man is not the goal of a woman's life; "and oh yes" indicates this is simply one more of Judith's successes in her new role. In this novel, then, women's power resides in succeeding at masculine occupations, insisting on equality, claiming sexual free-

dom, and growing up. It also implies acceptance of herself as a woman; she is able to put on her frilly clothes without becoming an artificial being constructed to please a man, able to cry without becoming a child again, able to assert her own wants even when dressed as a woman and crying.

The novel does not end as so many women's novels do, with the heroine getting her man. The sexual encounter between Jim and Judith is followed by a sexual encounter between two pigs during which Judith and Jim's mother, Mina, agree the male role in the life process is minimally significant: "'that's all he gets to do. Only limited usefulness'" (186). The sow seems to agree:

His necessity dispensed with, she wanted no more of him. At that the two women clapped again.

"You tell him, Marie Antoinette," cried Mina. "You tell him." And together they laughed, those insane women, laughed at everything they could and as hard as they could as they danced about in the melting snow. (187)

The novel ends with Judith "crying bitter and unrestrainedly" (190) over an unread letter from her lover in the city, then being soothed by the sounds of the pigs, and ultimately making her choice:

"Pigs," she said. "Pigs." And she opened herself for them, stretched herself wide and unending, her arms out, her head tall, her legs long.

"Pigs," she said, "you win." (190)

The image we are left with, then, is not of Judith welcoming either of her lovers (although Van Herk's word choices evoke a sexual image), but embracing, by choice, her vocation as pig farmer. The real power is not in a knife, alluring clothing, or sex, but in the ability to choose, recognizing what that choice necessarily precludes, and yet embracing the choice totally.

Judith's name signals the connection with the story of Judith and Holofernes in *The Apocrypha*. The ancient heroine, a widow running a large estate, chastises the Israelite men for being ready to surrender the town and announces, "'I am going to do a deed which will be remembered among our people for all generations'" (Judith 8: 32). After fasting and prayer, she transforms herself: "She put on sandals and anklets, bracelets and rings, her ear-rings and all her ornaments, and made herself very attractive, so as to catch the eye of any man who might see her (10:4). Using a

combination of cunning wisdom and her physical beauty, she arouses the interest of the enemy general until he “shook with passion” (12:16), but she comes to his tent when he is “dead drunk” (13:2) and cuts off his head with his sword. Returning home, she displays the head and announces, “‘Though my face lured him to destruction, he committed no sin with me, and my honour is unblemished’” (13:16). Seeing the head on the battlements panics the enemy forces, and so the town is preserved. Judith continues to live on her estate, and though she has many suitors, she remains unmarried. Van Herk transforms the widow into a woman who has left a lover, the estate into a pig farm, the beheading into castrating piglets, and the sackcloth into grubby work clothes, updating the ancient story to fit a modern context while retaining its archetypal structure. Her ability to succeed when men fail without losing her sexual desirability and her ability to use her sexuality without losing her honor or becoming dependent on a male make Van Herk’s Judith, like her ancient prototype, a strong image of female power. The strong parallels heighten our sense of the significance of the modern Judith’s actions; she too sets an example that can bring deliverance to her society.

In *The Tent Peg*, Van Herk restates the images of feminine power announced in *Judith*. Like Judith, the heroine of *The Tent Peg* takes a man’s job. She becomes a cook (ambiguously, a job with a woman’s nurturing function) on a mining expedition in the Yukon, successfully disguises herself as a man, and continues to wear men’s clothes and a masculine hairstyle even after admitting she is female. She goes by the name J.L. Using initials as a nickname is typically masculine. The name also reflects a biblical allusion, as she explains:

“I was really named after a person in the Bible. J, A, dash, E, L. People used to string it together so it sounded like ‘Jail.’ I didn’t like that, so I decided I would go by my initials, J.L.”  
(14)

Like the apocryphal Judith, the biblical Jael is a woman who uses both the feminine and masculine aspects of her nature: she entices the enemy general, Sisera, into her tent, nurtures him with milk and a blanket, and then kills him with a tent peg as he sleeps (Judges chapter 4).

Van Herk's J.L. follows the pattern of her predecessor in spirit if not in fact. In the climactic scene of the novel, one of the men in the camp is about to rape her in her tent, but she prevents the rape by taking his gun—a symbol of masculine power—from him before her male rescuers arrive on the scene:

. . . he fumbles at his pants. In a wild moment of lucidity I almost laugh at his ineptness. He's kneeling over me and he raises himself to get at his zipper just enough for me to bring my knees up and kick full force against his groin. He yells but I don't give him a chance to recover. I kneel him again and again, all the while fighting for that Magnum, trying to pry it loose from his raw-boned hands. And then he falls and I've got it, I'm standing over him with a loaded gun.

He tries to get up, lunges for me again, but I wave the gun at him.

"You wouldn't dare," he grunts. "Drop that gun."

"Oh yeah? I'd like nothing better than to blow your balls off."

"Just try it," he says. "You don't have the nerve."

There is a haze of blood behind my eyes and I know now I could fire a gun at him and hit him and never be sorry. I point the gun at him and pull the trigger, but he has been cautious enough to put it on safety. I unclick the safety, point at his crotch.

"Hey," he yells. "Don't be crazy."

I hesitate, then I point the gun up at the tent and fire. (219-20)

As in *Judith*, the symbol of male power passes from the man to the woman, the male is depicted as inept, and the castration image is emphasized by repetition. In fact, the next chapter continues to repeat the image: she is "holding that deadly pistol at a point directly between Jerome's legs" (221), saying, "'I'll blow your balls off'" (221), qualifying it with "'if you've got any. . . . I'm probably shooting at air'" (221), and asking her belated rescuer, "'Do you think he's got any balls, Mackenzie?'" (221). J.L.'s unladylike repetition of the word "balls" functions as another image of her appropriating masculine power—masculine language—for herself.

Like Judith, once J.L. has shown her masculine prowess, she can reveal her femininity, can put on feminine clothing and dance for all the men:

I'll play siren, put on the gypsy skirt that has been collecting creases in the bottom of my knapsack these three months, gather it in my hand and jump atop that sagging table to give them one last word, one final invocation to send them on their way. (225)

Van Herk presents this "one last word," in sexual imagery:

And I lift up my arms and I whirl, the skirt heavy around my thighs, dance for them until that table shivers. Whirl and kick in the ecstasy of the flames beneath me, devouring the summer under my feet. (225)

But the dance celebrates "victory, peace regained" (226), and symbolizes the woman's power over all the men in the mining camp:

And in their faces I see my transfiguration, themselves transformed, each one with the tent peg through the temple cherishing the knowledge garnered in sleep, in unwitting trust. (226)

Mackenzie responds specifically to this power in her:

Ah, Sisera, I would trade with you. I would give all I had to die at her hand, to have her offer me bread and milk, to feel her smoothing a rug over my tired frame and yes, to lie asleep and innocent as she lays one hand on the mallet and the other on the tent peg and gently, oh so gently that I might never wake, nails me to the earth, pierces my ear, my temple, with her loving wrath and bestows on me respite, peace. (227)

As she ends her dance she metamorphoses: "no longer the witch, the saint of fire, but our own J.L., flat and skinny as before" (227). However, the sinister powers of the witch and the beneficent powers of the saint (Joan of Arc, used by J.L. as an image of herself on page 225) remain active for Mackenzie: "I know the peg still lodges in my skull. I will never forget" (227).

In *Judith* and *The Tent Peg*, then, Van Herk combines images of power traditionally ascribed to men with others traditionally ascribed to women to give her heroines power. In *Survival*, Atwood describes typical heroines in Canadian novels as trapped in "the Rapunzel Syndrome": "These heroines have internalized the values of their culture to such an extent that they have become their own prisons" (209). Van Herk's heroines break out of the roles society has prescribed and find power in new roles that they create for themselves which unite images of masculine and feminine



power. The allusions to Judith, Jael, Circe, and St. Joan require us to see the modern heroines as new incarnations of ancient archetypes of women who reject standard feminine roles in order to accomplish significant social actions.

Van Herk writes in an essay about writing, "Art is anger. No contented person writes" ("The Art of Blackmail" 330). Alice Munro's sense of why a writer writes is quite different. She speaks of being "very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life" (Gibson 241), the importance of being "able to get at the exact tone or texture of how things are" (Gibson 241), and writing as a "way of getting control" (Gibson 245) of experience:

With me it has something to do with the fight against death, the feeling that we lose everything every day, and writing is a way of convincing yourself perhaps that you're doing something about this. (Gibson 243)

Not surprisingly, Munro's images of women's power differ markedly from Van Herk's. The human fight against death and the genderless struggle of people to progress in spite of the fact of death form the backdrop against which Munro's female characters seek power. In Munro's short fiction the battle of the sexes is presented in vivid images of women as powerful and powerless and equally vivid images of men as powerful and powerless.

*Who Do You Think You Are?*, published in the same year as Van Herk's *Judith* (1978), contains ten stories about Rose, a woman from a small town in Ontario who becomes a successful actress but is rather less than successful in her personal life. In her first serious romance, recounted in "The Beggar Maid," Rose seems to be quite powerful. Her lover, Patrick, "was the most vulnerable person Rose had ever known, he made himself so, didn't know anything about protecting himself" (68). The narrator tells us that Rose "could make him flinch at a vulgar word, a drawling tone" (84). Breaking her engagement to Patrick plunges him into misery. When she becomes aware of her power to confer happiness on him by merely changing her mind, she does so:

She was so moved, made so gentle and wistful, by the sight of him, that she wanted to give him something, some surprising bounty, she wished to undo his unhappiness.

Then she had a compelling picture of herself. She was running softly into Patrick's carrel, she was throwing her arms around him from behind, she was giving everything

back to him. Would he take it from her, would he still want it? . . . This was a violent temptation for her; it was barely resistible. . . .

It was not resistible, after all. She did it. (96)

Rose's asking "Would he take it from her, would he still want it?" (96) suggests the reconciliation stems not simply from nurturing tenderness but also from her need to test her power over him, to prove she can make him want her again in spite of the insults she had delivered as she broke the engagement.

Not surprisingly, their marriage ends in divorce; an encounter between Rose and Patrick nine years after the divorce reveals that Rose's power to confer happiness on either Patrick or herself is illusory. As in the earlier scene, Rose has a sudden vision of reconciliation:

And she had the same feeling that this was a person she was bound to, that by a certain magical, yet possible trick, they could find and trust each other, and that to begin this all that she had to do was go up and touch him on the shoulder, surprise him with his happiness. (98)

Ironically, Rose's power in this scene is power to create an enemy rather than to confer happiness. Munro presents her as lacking the traditional images of women's power centered in appearance:

She thought how haggard and dreary she must look, in her rumpled trenchcoat, her long, graying hair fallen forward around her face, old mascara smudged under her eyes. (99)

She has, however, one important symbol of male power—success in her career:

She had become fairly well-known by this time, her face was familiar to many people in this country. She did a television program on which she interviewed politicians, actors, writers, *personalities*, and many ordinary people. . . . (98)

When Patrick sees her, her power is not sufficient to revive their relationship:

He made a face at her. It was a truly hateful, savagely warning, face; infantile, self-indulgent, yet calculated; it was a timed explosion of disgust and loathing. It was hard to believe. But she saw it. (99)

Munro tells us that Rose connects this with the desire she often sensed in people she interviewed on television to make a face, making this seem a universal human desire, one generally repressed except under "special circumstances" (99):

A lurid unreal place, the middle of the night, a staggering unhinging weariness, the sudden, hallucinatory appearance of your true enemy.

. . . But she was not really able to understand how she could be an enemy. How could anybody hate Rose so much, at the very moment when she was ready to come forward with her good will, her smiling confession of exhaustion, her air of diffident faith in civilized overtures? (99)

Rose's power to make an enemy contrasts vividly with traditional images of women as nurturing, healing, reconciling enemies, giving life. In offering the insult when Rose wants to offer happiness, Patrick seems to have all the power. Yet, ironically, his power to make an enemy deprives him of any potentially good effects (on their child, for instance) that establishing a minimal relationship with his ex-wife might have. His power to create an epiphany for Rose—the knowledge that she could make someone hate her that much—and her power to have the epiphany are ironically matched by Patrick's failure to understand Rose's thoughts at this moment and her inability to communicate them. In one sense Patrick wins this small battle; in another, he loses.

The story "Simon's Luck" shows us Rose at her most and least powerful. Unable to handle waiting for Simon to call back after their initial glorious weekend together, she flees to Vancouver. Munro depicts her a year later with an important role in a television series: "possibly the best job she had ever had" (175). Again Rose's gaining this symbol of power traditionally attributed to men is accompanied by a loss of symbols of power traditionally attributed to women, for the role Rose plays is that of an older woman:

Some special make-up techniques, aging techniques, had to be used on her face; the make-up man joked that if the series was a success, and ran for a few years, these techniques would not be necessary. (175)

We see her costumed in a "dingy sweater and a head scarf" (176). Ironically, earlier in the story Munro depicts Rose trying to look younger:

Rose was wearing a flowered cotton dress, a long dress with a tucked bodice and puffed sleeves, which was too short in the waist and too tight in the bust to be comfortable. There was something wrongly youthful or theatrical about it; perhaps she was not slim enough to wear that style. Her reddish-brown hair was dyed at home. Lines ran both ways under her eyes, trapping little diamonds of darkened skin. (157)

These signs of aging do not prevent her picking up Simon at a party, but when he does not return, Munro specifically calls attention to Rose's age: "what could be more desperate than a woman of Rose's age, sitting up all night in her dark kitchen waiting for her lover?" (170). Fleeing, she fears her loss of power due to the aging process, a process she feels does not affect a man's power:

... she would have to be ashamed of, burdened by, the whole physical fact of herself, the whole outspread naked digesting putrefying fact. Her flesh could seem disastrous; thick and porous, grey and spotty. His body would not be in question, it never would be; he would be the one who condemned and forgave and how could she ever know if he would forgive her again? *Come here*, he could tell her, or *go away*. Never since Patrick had she been the free person, the one with that power; maybe she had used it all up, all that was coming to her. (173)

But forces beyond human control are at work on Simon's body too; Rose learns during the filming of a scene of the TV series that Simon has died of cancer of the pancreas. In the final paragraphs of the story, Munro contrasts art and life:

People watching [the television series] trusted that they would be protected from predictable disasters, also from those shifts of emphasis that throw the story line open to question, the disarrangements which demand new judgments and solutions, and throw the windows open on inappropriate unforgettable scenery.

Simon's dying struck Rose as that kind of disarrangement. It was preposterous, it was unfair, that such a chunk of information should have been left out, and that Rose even at this late date could have thought herself the only person who could seriously lack power. (177)

Power is available in art, then, in a way that it is not available in life; natural forces can be controlled by the artist to prevent

"disarrangements" that are not part of the intended artistic effect. Rose and Simon are both victims of natural processes, and although cultural conditioning gives Simon the advantage with respect to the aging process, both of them are equally powerless in an ultimate sense. Through her art, Rose temporarily gains power over the processes of time and change.

The theme of human beings' lack of power against the forces of time and change also informs the picture of the battle of the sexes Munro presents in the story "Lichen," from her 1986 collection, *The Progress of Love*. In this story David perceives his estranged wife, Stella, as lacking all the traditional images of woman's power to attract: "She is a short fat, white-haired woman, wearing jeans and a dirty T-shirt" (32). Her unattractiveness seems intentional:

David thinks that Stella has done this on purpose. It isn't just an acceptance of natural deterioration—oh, no, it's much more. Stella would always dramatize. But it isn't just Stella. There's the sort of woman who has to come bursting out of the female envelope at this age, flaunting fat or an indecent scrawniness, sprouting warts and facial hair, refusing to cover pasty veined legs, almost gleeful about it, as if this was what she'd wanted to do all along. Manhaters, from the start. You can't say a thing like that out loud nowadays. (33)

The metaphor David uses to describe Stella contrasts ironically with her name, a contrast Munro underlines by linking the name and image in one statement: "'Look what's happened to Stella,' says David, fuming. 'She's turned into a troll'" (32). By associating a star (with all its splendid celestial connotations) with a troll, a being who lives underground or in caves, David seems to diminish her power over him. Yet a troll is a supernatural being, capable of using its powers for malicious or beneficent effects; the irony of a celestial being likened to a troll makes the reader wonder what powers Stella has and how she will use them.

Unlike Rose, Stella does not have a brilliantly successful career. She refers to herself and her friends as "'us pensioned-off wives'" (36), though she says, "'I'm doing a piece for the historical society and the local paper. Quite the budding authoress'" (35). Instead of symbols of power generally attributed to men, Stella possesses the traditional nurturing powers of women; she makes jam for all her friends, and the elderly people she visits at the

nursing home replace her children as objects of her care. Visiting her father in the nursing home makes David recall

a picture of her as she had been twelve or fifteen years before. He saw her coming across the lawn at a suburban party, carrying a casserole. She was wearing a sundress. . . . Why did this picture please him so much? Stella coming across the lawn, with her sunlit hair—the gray in it then merely made it ash blond—and her bare toasted shoulders, crying out greetings to her neighbors, laughing, protesting about some cooking misadventure. Of course the food she brought would be wonderful, and she brought not only food but the whole longed-for spirit of the neighborhood party. With her overwhelming sociability, she gathered everybody in. (53)

This image of the younger Stella consists of traditional symbols of feminine power: attractive clothing, hair, and body; association with food and nurturing; and the ability to bring people together in social groups. But these images of power are not powerful enough; we learn that as David watched Stella at this moment in the past, he was “stroking the cold, brown, shaved, and prickly calf of another neighborhood wife” (53).

Past and present, David seems to have all the power. He brings along his current younger woman when he visits Stella, and lets Stella know that he is about to leave the younger woman for a yet younger woman. However, Munro subtly shows that the husband’s power is subject to time and change by juxtaposing him to Stella’s father:

To get used to looking at his father-in-law, David tried to think of him as a post-human development, something new in the species. Survival hadn’t just preserved, it had transformed him. Bluish-gray skin, with dark-blue spots, whitened eyes, a ribbed neck with delicate deep hollows, like a smoked-glass vase. (51)

David’s dyed hair and his relationships with ever-younger women will not ultimately prevent his becoming as aged, as “post-human,” as his father-in-law: “Wonder if we’ll get to that stage?” (52) asks Stella, referring to her father’s way of “fixing up the past so anything he wishes had happened did happen” (52). The likening of the young to the old and the vision of male aging counterpointed with female aging suggests neither men nor women have power in the final analysis. Even the very young woman David now

desires is not exempt from the power of natural forces; the powerful image Munro presents is of a photograph of the young girl, nude: forgotten in the window, it has faded until nothing is left but "lichen":

She sees that the black pelt in the picture has changed to gray. It's a bluish or greenish gray now. She remembers what she said when she first saw it. She said it was lichen. No, she said it looked like lichen. . . . She said, "Lichen." And now, look, her words have come true. The outline of the breast has disappeared. You would never know that the legs were legs. The black has turned to gray, to the soft, dry color of a plant mysteriously nourished on the rocks.

This is David's doing. He left it there, in the sun.

Stella's words have come true. (55)

For Stella, the writer, power is in words, words that have "come true," not of course, because the troll has controlled the sun, but because the woman who is likened to a hummingbird and a sunbeam (50) and who is associated with a vegetable garden and blackberries is in harmony with the processes of nature rather than fighting them. The pun inherent in the title of the story—"Lichen"/liken—suggests that woman's power—like man's, of course—resides in the ability to liken, to make similes and metaphors and comparisons that reflect the truth about nature's processes.

In *Survival* Atwood identifies four Basic Victim Positions. The characteristic stance in Position Two is

To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea. (37)

She goes on to explain that

Because the fake cause is so vast, nebulous and unchangeable, you are permanently excused from changing it, and also from deciding how much of your situation . . . is unchangeable, how much can be changed, and how much is caused by habit or tradition or your own need to be a victim. (37)

Munro's characters seem to be in Position Two; however, Munro's presentation ensures that we see not merely the unchangeable aspects of their situations but also the aspects they do have the

ability and responsibility to alter and transcend. The aging process may affect women's lives negatively with respect to their sexual power over men, but Munro emphasizes that this process touches men too, and that for both sexes art, whether Rose's acting or David and Stella's metaphor making, as Munro says in her interview with Gibson, "has something to do with the fight against death" (243). Images of power, then, that Munro ascribes to her characters reveal the power of the artistic process to transcend the "vast, nebulous, and unchangeable" (*Survival* 37) processes that affect human lives.

In a critique of *Survival* in 1978, Robin Matthews writes, "Atwood refuses to recognize the truly strong place of many women in the sexual and social order in Canadian fiction" (127). Whether or not *Survival* accurately describes the whole state of Canadian literature in 1972, it does clarify how Canadian literature looked to Atwood at that point in time, and prompts questions about where this vision has led her as an artist. How has this perception colored Atwood's portraits of women in her own fiction? Has she changed her mind since 1972? Does she still see the ideal as Basic Victim Position Four, "To be a creative non-victim" (*Survival* 38)? Looking at images of power and victimization in Atwood's two most recent novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Cat's Eye* (1988), suggests that nowadays Atwood is very much aware of "the truly strong place of women in the sexual and social order" in her own fiction. Published a year before and a year after Munro's *The Progress of Love*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Cat's Eye* present stronger critiques of society's role in victimizing women than Munro's fiction does, but at the same time offer significant, sustained images of power attained through art that parallel Munro's images.

Both Offred and Elaine are depicted as victims; yet each also has some kind of special power. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred, victimized by a system that reduces women to "two-legged wombs; that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (128), finds that the system also reduces men to begetting machines, although "there's no doubt about who holds the real power" (128). When the Commander to whom Offred has been given invites her to a secret rendezvous, she expects kinky sex, but finds he wants to play Scrabble, because what was, as Offred recalls, formerly a game of retired persons and adolescents has become "something different" (130):



Now it's forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable. Now he's compromised himself. It's as if he's offered me drugs. (130)

Offred's mind, especially its ability to make words, becomes the symbol of her power over the powerful male; she extracts gifts and favors in return for playing the crossword game.

Offred's power is in language; we learn from the scholar who reports two hundred years later that her story has been preserved because she spoke it into a tape recorder. This scholar, male, also uses words to discuss Offred's life in Gilead. In the sharp contrast between the empathetic emotion her words evoke in us and the lack of emotion—other than perhaps anger at the professor's extreme objectivity—that the scholarly discourse evokes in us, Atwood provides an image of Offred's power: the power to feel and to express that feeling in words that evoke feeling. The professor says of Offred,

Our author, then, was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part. But what else do we know about her, apart from her age, some physical characteristics that could be anyone's, and her place of residence? Not very much. She appears to have been an educated woman, insofar as a graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated. (287)

Unlike the professor, we see Offred as an individual rather than as representative. Since first person narrative gives us a privileged inside view, we know how she feels about her experiences, which seems more significant than what college she attended. Compare what the scholar says about her true name with what she says about it:

She does not see fit to supply us with her original name, and indeed all official records of it would have been destroyed upon her entry into the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre. "Offred" gives no clue, since, like "Ofglen" and "Ofwarren," it was a patronymic, composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question. Such names were taken by these women upon their entry into a connection with the household of a specific Commander, and relinquished by them upon leaving it. (287)

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginable distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark. (79-80)

To the scholar, Offred is an object of scientific study, to be dissected in order to add to the world's store of knowledge about the Gilead Republic. To the reader, Offred is a human being struggling for survival, and her ability to verbalize her struggle so as to engage our emotions rather than just our reason is the true source of her power—a power lacking in the scholar and his verbalizations about her struggle.<sup>1</sup>

In finding power in words, in speaking, Offred has moved from being a victim into what Atwood describes in *Survival* as Basic Victim Position Four, "To be a creative non-victim" (38):

In Position Four, creative activity of all kinds becomes possible. Energy is no longer being suppressed (as in Position One) or used for displacement of the cause, or for passing your victimization along to others . . . as in Position Two; nor is it being used for the dynamic anger of Position Three. And you are able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others' versions of it (particularly those of your oppressors). (38-39)

By telling us her story, her version of life in Gilead, Offred is a creative non-victim. However, the "violent duality" (to borrow Grace's phrase) of Atwood's vision, as always, colors the ending of the novel as we see Offred again being victimized, objectified by the male professor.

Elaine, the narrator and central character of *Cat's Eye*, seems victimized by other women rather than by men, and like Offred both does and does not become a creative non-victim by voicing her emotions both verbally through her narrative and non-verbally through her paintings. Her playmates Cordelia, Carol, and Grace victimize Elaine as a child. By criticizing her posture, her actions,

her words, her intelligence—"She's getting stupider," Cordelia says" (124)—the girls create insecurities and self-consciousness that produce great unhappiness in the child:

Once I'm outside the house there is no getting away from them. They are on the school bus, where Cordelia stands close beside me and whispers into my ear: "Stand up straight! People are looking!" Carol is in my classroom, and it's her job to report to Cordelia what I do and say all day. They're there at recess, and in the cellar at lunchtime. They comment on the kind of lunch I have, how I hold my sandwich, how I chew. (119-20)

But Cordelia doesn't do these things or have this power over me because she's my enemy. Far from it. I know about enemies. . . . With enemies you can feel hatred, and anger. But Cordelia is my friend. She likes me, she wants to help me, they all do. They are my friends, my girlfriends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I'm terrified of losing them. I want to please. (120)

Later, we see that Elaine has succeeded in her career—that image of power more traditionally ascribed to men than women—but retains a strong sense of inadequacy where women are concerned:

A woman strides towards me from the back, in a modified blonde porcupine haircut, a purple jumpsuit and green leather boots. I know immediately that I should not have worn this powder-blue jogging outfit. Powder-blue is lightweight. I should've worn nun black, Dracula black, like all proper female painters. I should have some clotted-neck vampire lipstick, instead of wimping out with Rose Perfection. (87)

Even in her black dress (which should symbolize power) at the opening of her art exhibit Elaine feels inadequate:

Now that I've got the thing on, it looks much the same as all the other black dresses I've ever owned. I check it for lint, apply my pink lipstick, and end up looking nice, as far as I can tell. Nice, and negligible.

I could jazz myself up somehow. I ought to have some dangly earrings, some bangles, a silver bow-tie on a little chain, an outsize Isadora Duncan strangle-yourself-by-mistake scarf, a rhinestone brooch of the thirties, in sly bad taste. (403)

Although Elaine lacks traditional images of female power in terms of clothing, hairstyle, and jewelry, she does have power because of her art. As with Offred's tale, double reactions to her art counterpoint each other. On the one hand, a woman throws a bottle of ink at one of Elaine's paintings, suggesting its power to evoke strong emotion; in contrast, comments in the gallery's catalogue of the show drain the pictures of all emotion:

"Risley continues her disconcerting deconstruction of perceived gender and its relationship to perceived power, especially in respect to numinous imagery," she says. (406)

Elaine comments on the description, "If I hold my breath and squint, I can see where she gets that" (406). The picture "One Wing," which Elaine says she painted for her brother after his death—"This is the kind of thing we do, to assuage pain" (407)—is described in the catalogue as "a statement about men, and the juvenile nature of war" (407). Because we have seen Elaine and her brother as children, watched them grow up, and watched her reaction to his death earlier in the novel, this catalogue description seems to miss the point. Elaine, unlike the seemingly powerful woman Charna, who wrote the descriptions, is capable of expressing herself, capable of evoking emotional responses, both in words and on canvas. Like the creative non-victim Atwood describes in *Survival*, Elaine "is able to accept . . . [her] own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others' versions of it" (39). She says of a painting of three people she knew as a child that she painted them "Not as they were, to themselves: God knows what they really saw in their own lives, or thought about" (407), but as she saw them: "But why shouldn't I reward them, if I feel like it? Play God, translate them into glory, in the afterlife of paint?" (407). This power to voice herself may give Elaine power over time:

I may have thought I was preserving something from time, salvaging something; like all those painters, centuries ago, who thought they were bringing Heaven to earth, the revelations of God. . . . (409)

On the other hand, Elaine notes that paintings do not last forever, and that art, once made public, becomes subject to interpretations outside the artist's control: "I can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean" (409). Time passing and audiences

reacting both limit the artist's power.

Both *Cat's Eye* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, then, indicate that Atwood has continued to perceive the idea of the victim and the need to become a non-victim as significant. By creating heroines who achieve power through artistic creation, Atwood provides her readers with models of women who exemplify the creative non-victim of Basic Victim Position Four.

Looking at images of female power and lack of it in recent works of fiction by Van Herk, Munro, and Atwood reveals that these three definers of the collective consciousness are very aware of the question of what makes women victims and what makes them powerful. Of the three, Van Herk takes the most strident feminist stance by presenting images in which women are seen to have androgynous power, power combined from men's and women's traditional sources of power; freedom of choice seems to be the ultimate power. Munro takes us beyond the issue of male power versus female power by presenting images in which forces outside the control of men or women have the ultimate control, levelling the power struggle to an insignificance in the larger scheme of things while attributing great power to artistic creation, to a human being's ability to liken. Atwood's recent writings see the female's power in terms of her ability to voice her life and emotions so as to win an emotional response; because the power to feel and to create feeling is for Atwood's heroines woman's true power, artistic creation becomes the symbol of woman's greatest power.

## NOTES

*The research for this paper has been supported by The Canadian Studies Faculty Research Programme and St. Mary's College Faculty Development Fund.*

<sup>1</sup> In the question period following Atwood's February 1989 reading in San Francisco, she said that the scholarly conference at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* has two functions: to give information about the Gileadean society that Offred could not know and to show that the oppressive society did not last, for scholars again function freely and a woman chairs the conference. Freibert's article on the novel suggests ideas related to my analysis when she states that Atwood's "Swiftian serio-comic vision comprises an ironic indictment of a society that treats a woman's body as a pawn and her life as an academic question" (280) and says that for Offred, creating her stories frees her from biological determinism (287).

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