

## Like a Hook into a *Cat's Eye*: Locating Margaret Atwood's Susie

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### Tel un crochet dans *Cat's Eye*: la place de Susie chez Margaret Atwood

*Dans Cat's Eye, Margaret Atwood narre l'histoire d'Élaine, sa victoire contre l'impuissance et la faiblesse, et sa réconciliation avec les personnages féminins de sa vie. L'histoire d'Élaine, toutefois, repose sur la 'répression' narrative du personnage de Susie, réduite au silence dans le roman. La distance à laquelle Susie est maintenue constitue une aporie dans le texte. En présentant Susie à travers des photographies, Crosbie 'plante un crochet dans l'oeil du chat.' Crosbie montre que le refus par Atwood de reconnaître la double subjectivité d'Élaine/Susie ébranle les motifs de la pitié et de la clôture qui structurent le roman. Cette démonstration se fait par un jeu entre texte et images.*

Women can domineer over and infantilize women just as well as men can. They know exactly where to stick the knife.

– Margaret Atwood

### Preface

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine Risley encounters a cabal of malevolent girls and women. Atwood's novel is her *Song of Bernadette*: Elaine encounters the spectre of the Virgin Mary in the Toronto ravines/Lourdes, a vision which serves as an analogue for her developing power as an artist.<sup>1</sup> As a painter, she is able to revise and assess the malignant female figures of her youth. She is also able to sanctify the few women who were kind to her: there are very few benevolent women in this text. Elaine draws rigid lines between men and women in her life; her relationships with men are "effortless"; their silences are "escap(ist)" and benign. Conversely, silence in the female sphere constitutes a dangerous lacuna, where plotting, malice and subversion reside. Because her childhood friends used silence to punish her, silence, to Elaine, performs an ominous function in women's discourse. It is in the silent, visual field of painting that Elaine

is ultimately able to create an alternative discourse, one which enables her to redress her powerlessness, and which allows her to demystify – often with great tenderness – the girls and women who terrorized her. Their frailties and the evanescence of their power are evident in her paintings and adult recollections, and these figures eventually become spectral; they are significant, exclusively, within Elaine's memory and composition.

There is a strange lacuna in Atwood's own composition, however, in her rendering of Susie, a minor character in the novel. Susie is an art student who studies with Elaine, a woman Elaine views with derision and contempt. Susie is sleeping with their art instructor, an older man, with whom Elaine also becomes involved, supplanting Susie in the process. Susie is viewed from a strange authorial distance: her increasing misery and wretchedness are depicted as portraits, drawn from a detached and pitiless perspective. When Susie ultimately aborts herself, in a horrific and lurid scene, Elaine is moved to question her detachment. Susie's role, however, is terminated at this point in the novel. Unlike the other women in Elaine's pictorial gallery and memory, she is left to languish in the novel's centre as an aporia, an impassable path that Atwood can, or will not, traverse.

I have recreated the story of Susie, using photographs and excerpts from Atwood's text, in order to create a discrete narrative, one which illuminates what is theoretically unresolved in the novel. While Atwood offers substantial motive with regard to Elaine's refusal to align herself with women in the novel, she is pointedly obtuse in her refusal to recognize the doubled subjectivity of Elaine/Susie.<sup>2</sup> Susie's silence is significant, because she is *silenced* and obscured in the text that is devoted to the notion of resurrection and revision. Elaine's description of this incident is particularly cruel and oblique, a narrative which is further negated by its isolation in the text. Atwood/Elaine's refusal to mitigate, or re-visit this incident substantially undercuts the themes of mercy and closure that dominate the novel. And because Susie is neither revenant within, nor relevant to the novel's development, it is the reader who must endeavour to extricate her, with a hook, from *Cat's Eye*.

## Notes

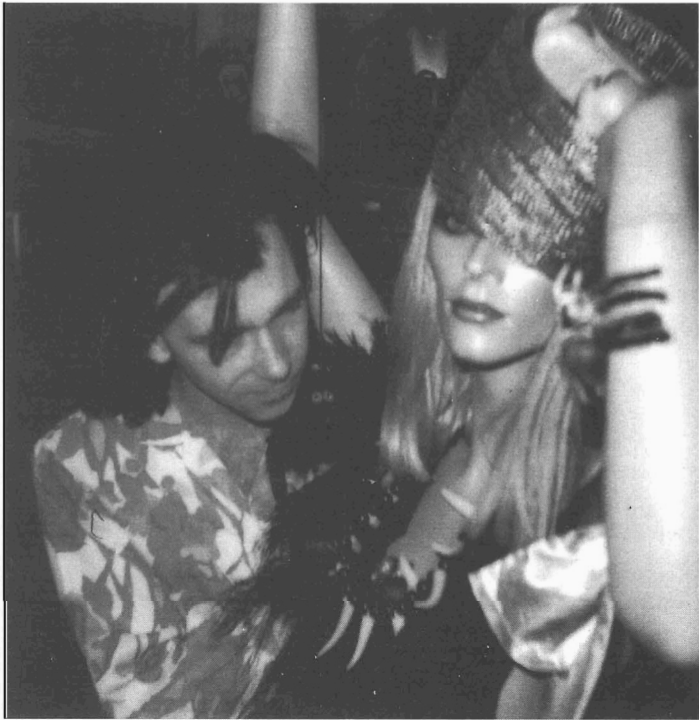
- 1 At the end of the novel, it becomes evident that Elaine herself was the figure of Mary, that she, in effect, saved herself.
- 2 Elaine does dream of Susie asking her if she knows what a "twin set" is, but Atwood never returns to, or addresses, this provocative suggestion.

## What's Susie wearing?



Susie has yellow hair, which I can tell she rolls and sets and then dishevels, and tips ash-blond at the ends. She wears jeans and black turtlenecks too, but her jeans are skintight and she's usually got something around her neck, a silver chain or a medallion. She does her eyes with a heavy black line over the lid like Cleopatra.... She has a little breathless voice...even her name is like a powder puff. I think of her as a silly girl who's just fooling around at art school, too dumb to get into university, although I don't make judgements like this about the boys.

## She is having a love affair with Mr. Hrbik



I decide that it's Mr. Hrbik who loves Susie. Or he doesn't really love her: he's besotted by her.... Susie herself is incapable of love, she's too shallow. I think of her as the conscious one, the one in control: she's toying with him, in a hard lacquered way straight out of forties movie posters.... She throws off guilt like a sweet aroma, and Mr. Hrbik staggers besotted toward his fate.

## I knew what love was supposed to be



Susie was the sort of girl who would go for this kind of love. She would be abject, she would cling and grovel. She would lie on the floor, moaning, hanging on to Mr. Hrbik's legs, her hair falling like blond seaweed over the black leather of his shoes.... From this angle, Mr. Hrbik was cut off at the knees and Susie's face was invisible. She would be squashed by passion, obliterated.

## **These days Josef rarely mentions Susie...**



I prefer to think of Susie as a woman shut inside a tower, up there in The Monte Carlo on Avenue Road, gazing out the window over the top of her painted sheet metal balcony, weeping feebly, waiting for Josef to appear. I can't imagine her having any other life apart from that.

**If she finds out, will she...go for me with a  
steak knife?**



She's found out that I'm working at the Swiss Chalet – probably it's Josef who told her, casually, skirting discovery...and once in a while she comes in for a cup of coffee, late in the afternoon when there's nobody much around. She's gained a little weight, and the flesh of her cheeks is puffy. I can see what she'll look like in fifteen years, if she isn't careful.

## The last time I saw her



She ate in a mechanical way, as if eating was a chore, but she finished everything. It could be that she was waiting for consolation, because of Josef: whatever else might happen, he would never marry her, and she must have known that.



## Susie's voice on the line is a soft, desperate wail



When I knock on the door, nobody answers.... On the carpet there's a dark footprint. Susie is behind the curtain that closes off the sleeping area. She is lying on the bed in her pink shortie nightie, white as an uncooked chicken, eyes closed.... Underneath her, across the sheet, is a great splotch of fresh blood, spreading like bright red wings to either side of her.

## What'd she use, a knitting needle?



I don't want to be implicated...I agree...that she's been. At the same time...everything that's happened to her could well have happened to me. But there is also another voice; a small mean voice, ancient and smug, that comes from somewhere deep inside my head: *It serves her right.*

**It's enormously pleasing to me, this act of walking away.**



I dream about Susie, in her black turtleneck and jeans...her hair cut into a pageboy...holding a coiled skipping rope, licking an orange popsicle.... She is not drained and boneless, as I'd last seen her. Instead she is sly-eyed, calculating.

**I know I have done something wrong.**

