

Unraveling the Mysteries of Childhood: Metaphorical Portrayals of Children in Margaret Atwood's Fiction*

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Abstract: Most metaphorical expressions related to children in Margaret Atwood's novels and short stories can be grouped into two coherent sets. The predominant negative set includes a wide range of monsters and hideous animals, whereas the much shorter list of positive representations encompasses sunflowers, jewels, feathers, little angels, gifts and lambs. Negative representations of children in Atwood's fiction are generally rendered in an unconventional manner and reflect the frustration felt by realistically portrayed characters in their everyday experience. On the contrary, favorable expressions have a tendency toward stereotype and often belong to the world of memories, dreams and illusions.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; metaphor; children in literature; literary portrayal of childhood; monstrous babies.

Summary: Introduction. Negative conceptualizations of childhood. Challenging the myth of childhood innocence. The deconstruction of idyllic perceptions of childhood. Conclusion.

Resumen: Las expresiones metafóricas relativas a los niños en las novelas y relatos breves de Margaret Atwood se pueden agrupar en dos series coherentes. La extensa serie negativa incluye una amplia variedad de monstruos y de animales repugnantes, mientras que en la reducida lista de representaciones positivas figuran girasoles, joyas, plumas, angelitos, regalos y corderos. En las obras de ficción de Atwood, las representaciones negativas de los niños generalmente adoptan formas no convencionales y reflejan la frustración que sienten en su vida diaria los personajes caracterizados de manera realista. En cambio, las expresiones positivas tienden a ser estereotipadas y a menudo pertenecen al mundo de los recuerdos, los sueños y las quimeras.

Palabras clave: Margaret Atwood; metáfora; niños en la literatura; representación literaria de la infancia; bebés monstruosos.

Sumario: Introducción. Conceptualizaciones negativas de la infancia. El cuestionamiento del mito de la inocencia infantil. La deconstrucción de las percepciones idílicas de la infancia. Conclusiones.

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The aim of this article is to explore Margaret Atwood's depictions of children by examining the functional significance of the metaphorical language related to infancy in her novels and short stories. A close analysis of the metaphors used by Atwood to refer to children reveals how effectively one of our most influential contemporary writers has conveyed the ambivalent and often conflicting perceptions of childhood which prevail in our society. Sometimes the author invites us to deconstruct conventional metaphors that express stereotyped attitudes and widely accepted views in this field. On other occasions, however, she introduces non-conventional metaphors that throw light on less evident features or put forward controversial notions in this same area.

The metaphors of Atwood's fiction, to be analyzed within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, are used not only by parents (especially mothers) in relation to their sons and daughters, but also by other adults when recalling their (generally painful) childhoods or when reflecting (ordinarily in a deprecatory manner) on other people's children. Many metaphors concerning babies are connected with negative birth and motherhood experiences. A small number of metaphorical expressions are not employed by adults, but by young siblings when referring to their baby brothers or sisters in an equally unfavorable fashion.

The most burdensome and unpleasant features of bearing and raising children are emphasized throughout *The Edible Woman* (1969), Atwood's first published novel, which underscores the oppressive aspects of motherhood while frequently resorting to grotesque humour. Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist of *The Edible Woman*, contemplates her friend Clara as a model of the woman she would become if she got married and had children. In Marian's words, pregnant Clara in her seventh month looks "like a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon" (31), and "like a strange vegetable growth, a bulbous tuber that had sent out four thin white roots and a tiny pale-yellow flower" (32). After the delivery, Marian envisages her friend Clara "deflating toward her normal size again" and is relieved when she thinks that "she would no longer feel as if she was addressing a swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead, a shape that had made her think of a queen-ant, bulging with the burden of an entire society" (115). The image of the expectant mother is, for Marian,

that of “the monstrosity of the female” (Waugh 185). When Marian speculates on what Clara’s “tuberous abdomen” (130)—also described by the third-person narrator as a “gigantic pumpkin-like growth”—might contain, the metaphors she chooses imply that she visualizes the baby as the result of disease. Making “cheerful but notably uncheering remarks intended to lighten the atmosphere” in one of her visits to her friend, Marian conjectures: “‘Maybe it’s got three heads,’ and ‘Maybe it isn’t a baby at all but a kind of parasitic growth, like galls on trees, or elephantiasis of the navel, or a huge bunion...’” (114).

However, none of these fantastic speculations is materialized in the novel, because Clara gives birth to a perfectly normal baby that, according to her own words, is not “very interesting at this stage” and virtually undistinguishable from the others (132). Clara tells Marian that all new-born babies look like “red shrivelled prunes” (132), and her metaphors for her two older children are also far from being complimentary, because they include a “little leech,” an octopus “all covered with suckers” (31), “barnacles encrusting a ship and limpets clinging to a rock” (36). Other than being hideous animals, the main feature that leeches, octopuses, barnacles and limpets have in common is that of attaching themselves in a manner which provokes disgust. Clara manifests her enthusiasm about childbirth only once, when she describes it as being “really marvellous” and “sort of fascinating” in spite of being “messy, all that blood and junk” (128). Having born three children already, she explains that every time she gets “excited waiting to see” how “the little bugger sticks its head out” and she feels that “it’s like when you were little and you waited and waited and finally got to open your Christmas presents” (128). Apart from this exception, throughout the rest of the novel no room is left for other agreeable images of children, whether they are seen from the perspective of Clara, an average mother of her generation (the 1960s), or from the point of view of the still-single Marian, who becomes increasingly reluctant to follow her friend’s steps and to share her exhausting and generally frustrating experience of motherhood. Other characters in the novel foreground this theme, which involves an intensely negative conceptualization of children. Revolted at the thought that Ainsley is pregnant by him, Len reveals that gestation is related to his fear of eggs, a phobia triggered in his childhood when his mother forced him to eat what he imagined was an unborn little chicken. Ainsley tries to sooth him by saying, “It’s not going to be a little chicken anyway, it’s going to be a lovely nice baby”

(160). In fact, Ainsley's apparently harmless and well-intended statement strengthens the connection between human babies and chicks in Marian's mind so that she will not only stop eating eggs, but also become even more reluctant to have a baby. Another minor character of the novel, graduate student Fish, who is analyzing *Alice in Wonderland* from a Freudian perspective as "a sexual-identity-crisis book," argues that Alice "rejects Maternity when the baby she's been nursing turns into a pig" (193–94). This allusion to the Pig Baby, "sneezing and howling alternately without a moment's pause" in Lewis Carroll's most famous book for children (*Alice* 47), denotes an additional deprecatory reference to babies in Atwood's novel.

Just as happens in *The Edible Woman*, in *Life Before Man* (1979), a novel published ten years later, children are represented as insatiable creatures absorbing energy from their mothers. In *Life Before Man*, the main metaphor used by Atwood to elaborate on this idea more extensively is that of a squid, an animal which she had not mentioned in her previous novel, but which reminds us of Clara's saying about her baby in *The Edible Woman*: "I sometimes think she's all covered with suckers, like an octopus" (31). Elizabeth, one of the three protagonists of *Life Before Man*, is the mother of two daughters, Janet and Nancy. In an early scene of the novel, Elizabeth pays a visit to the doctor because she fears that she is going deaf. While she is having her hearing checked, sitting still and wearing a set of headphones, she is compelled to focus her attention on what she sees in front of her.

Elizabeth stares at the wall, on which hangs a picture done in painted plaster: a tree, a fairy-faced child gazing up at the branches, and a poem in scrolled script:

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a Tree.
A Tree whose hungry mouth is pressed
Against the Earth's sweet flowing breast... (59)

These are the first lines of Alfred Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" (1913), a poem clearly meant to evoke warm feelings about the nurturing relationship between mother earth and her child tree, taking into account that sap's immediate referent is human milk. In his poem, Kilmer uses anthropomorphic images to compare two acts: that of a woman feeding

her child with milk from her breast and that of the earth providing sap to a tree. However, seen from Elizabeth's perspective, the idyllic picture of "A Tree whose hungry mouth is pressed / Against the Earth's sweet flowing breast" (59) resembles a kind of squid, with tentacles instead of roots, "sticking itself onto that rounded bulge of earth, sucking, voracious" (60). This mental association reminds her of how Nancy, one of her two daughters, "started biting her in the sixth month, with the first tooth" (60). Almost one year later, linking the words "mummy" ("a dried corpse in a gilded case"), "mum" (silent) and "mama" (short for mammary gland), Elizabeth remembers Kilmer's line "A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed" again and reflects: "If you didn't want trees sucking at your sweet flowing breast why did you have children?" (250). But she does not even try to answer her question by explaining the reasons why she had children or why other people might have them as well. Instead, she foresees how her daughters may be "preparing for flight, betrayal, they will leave her, she will become their background" (250). What follows in Elizabeth's mind is a series of anticipatory scenarios that foreshadow a bleak future for her as an old mother when her children grow up. Elizabeth's ominous vision of the tree as a greedy nursing baby drawing energy like a voracious squid from the lactating mother stands in sharp contrast not only to Kilmer's placid metaphor of infant breastfeeding, but also to most metaphors about motherhood which involve trees or other plants. For instance, in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), another Canadian novel of the same period, a mother's leg is perceived by her daughter as a "tree trunk" from which she is growing as a "young branch" (77) or clings as a "vine" (291).

According to George Lakoff and Mark Turner, in our traditional way of conceiving birth, BIRTH IS ARRIVAL, as we speak of a baby being "on the way," or "a little bundle from heaven," and we announce its "arrival" (1). In *Life Before Man*, however, birth is presented as an unconventional kind of arrival, with traumatic effects. When Elizabeth was in labour, her husband Nate was not allowed in the delivery room, and he resented being excluded from what he recognized as a crucial event which was metaphorically associated with three different natural disasters: "Behind doors an earthquake was taking place, a flood, a tornado that could rip his life apart in minutes, and he was shut out from it" (164).

Throughout the novel, Nate is presented as a nurturing father, gentle and patient with his two daughters, for whom he cooks and makes toys, and to whom he remains closely attached. After breaking his marriage

with Elizabeth, Nate still respects his ex-wife basically because she is the mother of his daughters. Lesje, Nate's lover, feels so bitter about this that she decides to have a child by him. Atwood noted in an interview conducted in 1982 that Lesje gets pregnant exclusively because "she is tired of being put down" by Nate "for not being the mother" that his former wife Elizabeth is (Brans 303). Pregnant as a result of an impulsive act of vengeance, Lesje looks fearfully forward to a baby who will embody the kind of life that she, as a paleontologist, has seen evolving. She becomes obsessed with the possible birth of a monster: "Surely no child conceived in such rage could come to much good. She would have a throwback, a reptile, a mutant of some kind with scales and a little horn on the snout" (*Life* 293). Such a phobia is partly brought on by her former lover William's explanations about the noxious effects of DDT and radiation upon human body tissues "which will almost certainly cause her to give birth to a two-headed child or to a lump of flesh the size of a grapefruit, . . . or to a child with its eyes on one side of its face, like a flounder" (142). What seems to be an apocalyptic threat in the contemporary setting of *Life Before Man* actually takes place in a futuristic novel published six years later, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), where a Handmaid is likely to produce an "Unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet" (122). But in *Life Before Man*, a novel with a plausible plot and well-rounded characters, these monstrosities exist only in the minds of anxious expectant mothers. In the life of the 1970s which is portrayed in this novel, written within the conventions of literary realism, children are "the secret weapon, the final solution, the one unspeakable thing" to be used by parents in their quarrels (84), or mere commodities, that is, "counters" to be dragged out in "the bargaining process" of divorce (204) or "a dress at a bargain" to be fought over by two grandmothers who hate each other (93).

The seriously depressed narrator-protagonist of "Under Glass" (1972), one of the short stories collected in *Dancing Girls* (1977), believes that her recent dream about having a baby "the right size and colour" is a sign of recovery from her illness (77). As a rule, her nights are filled with nightmares about monstrous babies, which she describes in detail:

Usually when I dream of babies they are scrawny as kittens, pale greenish and highly intelligent; they talk in polysyllables and I know they aren't

mine but are creatures from another planet sent to take over the earth, or that they are dead. Sometimes they're covered with fur. (77)

Therefore, she feels relieved when she finally dreams about delivering a baby that is pink (rather than green) and just cries (instead of talking), like all normal babies. However, her self-comment about her conviction that the world does not need her genes reveals one of the reasons for her negative attitude toward maternity, a source of anxiety which she tries to mask jokingly when she says to herself that “having a gourd or a tomato would surely be more pleasant and useful these days than having a baby” (77). Readers get a sense that profound psychological distress must lie hidden beneath the surface of the humor inherent in the comic analogies of babies and vegetables drawn by this woman, who reacts by punishing herself because she cannot move from a “depressive position marked by self-injury and self-negation” (Barzilai 316).

When the protagonist of *Alias Grace* (1996) was six or seven, she heard her tyrannical father complaining about the fact that her unfortunate mother was going to bring “another mouth to feed” into their already miserable household (107). Putting her hand on her pregnant mother’s belly, Grace underwent an experience which she would many years later explain as follows:

I had a picture of an enormous mouth, on a head like the flying angel heads on the gravestones, but with teeth and all, eating away at my mother from the inside, and I began to cry because I thought it would kill her. (107)

Thus, Grace conceptualized the unborn baby by means of an extremely frightening image because she took literally what was meant figuratively, a reaction that can be easily understood if we consider her age and her childhood trauma. Yet, an important aspect to notice is that we are not hearing a child’s voice, but the narrative voice of the adult Grace, who may resort to melodramatically exaggerating her past suffering in order to represent her childhood as doomed in a solipsistic account primarily devised to appeal for sympathy and establish her innocence thirty years after her trial and conviction for murder (Kohlke 125–26).

Lesje’s recurrent fantasies of hideous babies and Grace’s vision of the huge mouth eating away at her mother from the inside belong to the realm of imagination in the realistic settings of *Life Before Man* and *Alias*

Grace. Yet, the equally realistic settings of many other pieces of Atwood's fiction are peopled not by outlandish monsters, but just by ugly or physically unattractive children, labeled by themselves or by their parents with unflattering terms which are not exempt from humor. For example, the protagonist of *Lady Oracle* (1976), the popular romance novelist Joan Foster, recalls how she thought that both her manipulative mother and her exacting schoolteacher had seen her as "a fat little girl who was more like a giant caterpillar than a butterfly, more like a white grub if you were really going to be accurate" (47). The adult Joan speculates that her mother had probably named her after Joan Crawford, among other reasons, because she wanted her daughter to be as thin as the American film actress (42). In rebellion against the role imposed on her, Joan used to eat compulsively well into her teens, deriving "a morose pleasure" from the embarrassment that her obesity inflicted on her mother (74). After having dieted away her one hundred pounds of excess weight in order to meet the stipulations of her aunt's will, Joan Foster also remembers that, when she was fifteen and had reached her "maximum growth," she had felt that her emotionally abusive mother "was tired of having a teenaged daughter who looked like a beluga whale" (74). Since Joan is the first-person narrator of a novel which never allows her mother's perspective to be known beyond doubt, there is no way to ascertain whether the metaphorical conceptualizations of the girl as "a giant caterpillar," "a white grub" and "a beluga whale" should be appraised as corresponding to the mother's actual perception, or else to the daughter's distorting retrospective suppositions. Atwood's allusions to Joan Crawford (whose name appears nine times in the novel) brings to mind how the last role of the famous actress—that of the controlling mother—was created by one of her four adopted children, Christine, who demonized the Hollywood star through her controversial book *Mommie Dearest* (1978) and its 1981 film adaptation (Lawn 34–35). Although Christine Crawford's bitter memoir of a particularly hostile mother-daughter relationship did not have a direct influence on *Lady Oracle*, because it was published two years later than Atwood's novel, it provides an interesting non-fictional parallel to the fictional account of Joan Foster's troubled childhood and adolescence.

The dissatisfaction that parents (especially mothers) feel or are supposed to feel about their children could be illustrated by many other examples drawn from Atwood's fiction. Most of these examples also reveal how children (especially daughters) internalize their parents' perceptions of

themselves to the point of becoming powerful and enduring self-perceptions that affect their adult lives. In the short story entitled “The Age of Lead,” collected in *Wilderness Tips* (1991), Jane must endure forever the fate of being an unfortunate “consequence” of the mistake her parents made by conceiving her: “She had been a mistake, she had been a war baby. She had been a crime that had needed to be paid for, over and over” (163). Sometimes, however, unexpected circumstances help these complex-ridden children overcome their insecurities and they grow into confident and self-reliant people. Christine, the protagonist of the short story entitled “The Man from Mars,” contained in the volume *Dancing Girls*, was made aware of her lack of appeal, because “to her parents she was a beefy heavyweight, a plodder, lacking in flair, ordinary as bread” (23). As a result of such a demeaning parental estimate of herself, “in childhood she had identified with the false bride or the ugly sister” of fairytales (23). But, as soon as a young Asian man began to follow her on the university campus and some male students seemed to start finding her attractive, Christine experienced a total metamorphosis though her body remained unchanged. Before that, “when she was in the bathtub she often pretended she was a dolphin” (15), thus playing a game left over from her childhood. After her psychological transformation, “in the bathtub she no longer imagined she was a dolphin; instead she imagined she was an elusive water-nixie, or sometimes, in moments of audacity, Marilyn Monroe” (24).

Contrary to cultural expectations, babies metaphorically referred to as kittens in Atwood’s fiction can be perceived as menacing, as exemplified by the protagonist of “Under Glass” with her nightmares of babies that are “scrawny as kittens” (*Dancing Girls* 77). In “Giving Birth” (1977), another story collected in *Dancing Girls*, Jeanie feels how “a wet kitten slithers between her legs” and apprehensively keeps her eyes closed until the doctor tells her that she should look at her baby (239). Babies conceptualized as kittens may even evoke death, as happens in *Alias Grace* when the protagonist recollects how her father “would say that he did not know why God had saddled him with such a litter” and that his children, including Grace, “should all have been drowned like kittens in a sack” (108).

The most recurrent use of the conceptual metaphor BABIES ARE KITTENS in Atwood’s fiction appears in her novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000), where the image of a kitten stands for that of a baby which causes its mother’s death in childbirth. Iris, who was orphaned when she was aged nine, recalls how she and her six-year-old sister Laura overheard the

housekeeper saying about their mother's quick but fatal delivery: "It slipped out just like a kitten, but I have to say she bled buckets" (91). Both girls were so curious to see the kitten that they tiptoed up the back stairs, but what they saw in an enamel basin beside a pile of blood-soaked sheets was not a kitten: "It was grey, like an old cooked potato, with a head that was too big; it was all curled up. Its eyes were squinched shut, as if the light was hurting it" (91). Laura's immediate reaction was calm as she understood that, rather than a kitten, it was a baby she assumed "didn't want to get itself born" (92). Nevertheless, as days went by, Laura began to ask awkward questions such as "How could anything so little kill Mother?" (137). Later on, when Iris menstruated for the first time, Laura concluded that her sister "would have a little grey baby like a kitten" and then would die just as their mother did (159). It is in the section entitled "The kitten" that this theme is more fully developed through the dialogue following Laura's acknowledgement that Iris is pregnant.

She turned towards me, her face smooth and white as a porcelain plate, the expression sealed inside it. But she didn't seem surprised. Nor did she congratulate me. Instead she said, "Remember the kitten?"

"What kitten?" I said.

"The kitten Mother had. The one that killed her."

"Laura, it wasn't a kitten."

"I know," said Laura. (427)

Although Iris was not physically threatened by bringing forth a baby girl that "looked like any newborn baby" (431), the shadows of death in childbirth and of failed motherhood pervade the whole novel. Laura's obsession with the "kitten" can be related to her refusal to eat rabbits, because she thought "they looked like skinned babies" and observed: "You'd have to be a cannibal to eat them" (204). Iris, as the fictional author of this memoir, remarks: "As most small children do, Laura believed words meant what they said, but she carried it to extremes" (86). When interviewed about *The Blind Assassin* in 2001, although Atwood did not specifically mention Asperger's syndrome, she pointed out that Laura suffers from "a mild form of autism" which explains why, being a literalist who "takes things and people at their word," she "cannot handle metaphor" (Heilmann and Taylor 140–41).

The metaphorical language displayed by Atwood's characters to reflect on their early years manifests their disturbing vision of childhood, not as a stage of happiness and harmony, but rather of fear, anxiety and painful awakening, as well as cruelty. "Well, all children are sad / but some get over it," says the blunt speaker of Atwood's poem "A Sad Child" (4), assuming that sorrow is an intrinsic element of childhood, an essential feature in the forging of individuals which tends to intensify their unresolved egotistic pain (e.g. the obsessive resentment over the common hurt of not being the favorite child in the family) instead of increasing their empathy with other sufferers. The third-person narrator of *Bodily Harm* (1981) uses a simile which highlights children's insensitivity towards the suffering of others. A man who has been beaten by the police is struggling onto his knees while "the policemen are standing back, watching him with what seems like mild curiosity, two children watching a beetle they've crippled" (146). The comparison is pressed further when the narrator adds a rather unflattering comment about the childhood memories of Rennie, the protagonist, who is contemplating this violent scene: "Perhaps now they will drop stones on him, thinks Rennie, remembering the schoolyard. To see which way he will crawl. Her own fascination appalls her" (146). This episode projects a remarkably bleak image of childhood, subverting the stereotypical notions of goodness traditionally associated with it.

A number of metaphorical expressions in Atwood's fiction challenge the archetype of childhood innocence and, without resorting to fantasies of evil children such as the ones analyzed by Adrian Schober (2004) and Karen J. Renner (2013; 2016), emphasize how ordinary human cruelty actually starts in infancy. For example, the protagonist of *Surfacing* (1972) has a clear memory of a symbolic killing she did when she was a young child. She and her brother, pretending they were "a swarm of bees," gnawed the fingers, feet and nose off their least favorite doll, ripped her cloth body, pulled out the grey stuffing and threw her into the lake (124). This happened before they learned about Hitler and collaborated in killing him together with other people they marked as enemies. Their preferred "games became war games" (124). Reflecting on the roots of human violence, the unnamed narrator-protagonist of this novel concludes that "to become like a little child again" means to become "a barbarian, a vandal" (126). Likewise, in one of the stories collected in the volume *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983), recalling that she and her brother used to stage "World War Two on the living-room floor, with

armies of stuffed bears and rabbits,” the narrator reckons that the game which their mother thought “was merely cute may have been lethal” (25).

The first-person narrator of the darkly comic piece “Making Poison,” contained in *Murder in the Dark* (1983), recalls the time when, being five years old, she and her brother had to decide what to do with the poison they had concocted with so much glee, for they needed a definite purpose. Although at present she is not certain about the outcome, she mentions that one of the possibilities they considered was throwing it at “some innocuous child” (10). By equating the activities of making poison and making a cake in the last paragraph of the story, she prompts readers to interpret it in its entirety as disturbingly ironic. In “Horror Comics,” another story of the same collection, a woman evokes how, when she was twelve years old, she experienced malicious impulses to transgress social norms by stealing horror comics from drugstores and throwing snowballs at grownups with the complicity of a friend. Pretending to be a vampire was a game the two girls laughed at while leaning against the wall of a funeral home, but what finally terrified them was the look of “pure hatred” in a woman’s face, because it taught them the difference between the symbolic and the real (13).

Bethan Jones has expounded the long- and short-term effects of the “subtle and devastating psychological bullying” (31) to which Elaine Risley, the protagonist of *Cat’s Eye* (1989), is subjected between the ages of nine and eleven. To the list of damaging effects discussed at length and elucidated by Jones we could perhaps add Elaine’s tendency to fashion highly upsetting metaphorical expressions related to children and babies. For example, adult Elaine wonders why people, forgetting history, “clothe small girls in the colours of despair, slaughter, treachery and murder,” and ends up with a frightful recollection of “the little girls with their assessing eyes, their slippery deceitful smiles, tartaned up like Lady Macbeth” (113). Another image still troubling Elaine also goes back to her tormented childhood: she is sitting at the family Christmas dinner table, not eating much and staring at “the turkey, which resembles a trussed, headless baby” (131). The third sinister example is located in the midst of an episode of bullying, when Elaine hears how “the voices of the children rise in the schoolyard,” and reflects: “They sound to me like ghosts, or like animals caught in a trap: thin wails of exhausted pain” (141).

Roz, one of the protagonists of *The Robber Bride* (1993), loves and feels proud of her fifteen-year-old twins, but she humorously notes a look

of savagery or beastliness on their faces as they “turn their identical eyes towards her, lambent eyes like those of forest cats, and smile their identical heartless heart-crushing smiles, showing their slightly feral faun’s teeth” (86). The reasons of this unusual envisioning of Paula and Erin are not left unexplained. Unlike their elder brother Larry, who “didn’t like the more violent stories” because they gave him nightmares, before adolescence the two girls had enjoyed the unexpurgated versions of classic fairy tales with “all the pecked-out eyes and cooked bodies and hanged corpses and red hot nails intact” (341). Not only had Paula and Erin relished the gruesome, but they had even added more brutality in each retelling as they “would fight for control of the story,” unlike Larry, who “used to sit gravely” and “didn’t comment much” (340). The taste for violence exhibited by the twins during their childhood receives extensive attention and is summed up as follows: “It amazed Roz, then, how bloodthirsty children could be” (341). Apart from recurring through Atwood’s fiction, this theme reappears in some of her interviews. Reminiscing about her own reading as a child, the writer has noted that she found fascinating a book she had memorized by the time she was six, a copy of the complete version of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* which her parents bought by mistake. The violent episodes of these unexpurgated children’s tales did not bother her at all, whereas they terrified her younger sister (Lyons 224; Oates 70; Ross and Davies 152).

In her dystopian post-apocalyptic MaddAddam trilogy Atwood explores in graphic ways many issues concerning violence and children, including the lack of parental love, child abuse (in particular, child prostitution, child pornography on the internet and the sale of destitute children into the sex slave trade) and the aggressive instinctual drives which are developed since infancy. Early in *Oryx and Crake* (2003), adult Jimmy (alias Snowman) shouts to himself with anguish “I am not my childhood,” a cry epitomizing his futile will to overcome the traumatic experiences which burden his whole existence (68). His eccentric scientist friend Crake (whose original name was Glenn) was convinced that “too much time was wasted in child-rearing . . . Childrearing, and being a child” (158). Therefore, when he devised a genetically improved species of child-like humanoids he called “the Children of Crake” or “the Crakers,” he made sure that their growth rate would be much higher than that of humans so that a yearling would look like a five-year-old, and by the age of four they would be adolescents (158). The Children of Crake are like human children in the sense that they interpret literally everything they hear. But, unlike humans, the new

humanoids resulting from the Paradise Project are as innocent and gentle as Adam and Eve in their earthly paradise before the Fall, that is, before they committed the original sin which the whole of humankind would inherit and which explains innate wickedness according to the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the last novel of the trilogy, *MaddAddam* (2013), it is suggested that Crake decided to eliminate in the humanoids he created the “element of childish glee” (40) to be found in war, “the ginning, elemental malice” which plagues human beings since their inception (41).

Rather than terribly abused, some of the children depicted in this satirical trilogy are simply neglected, such as the city children of the twenty-first century described by Pamela Robertson Wojcik in *Fantasies of Neglect: Imagining the Urban Child in American Film and Fiction* (2016). In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy indicates his dissatisfaction with his mother, who at first was too busy working as a microbiologist until she left her job due to depression and finally abandoned the family when he was still a schoolboy. He complains that she “could never seem to recall how old Jimmy was or what day he was born” (50). Being left to his own devices, little Jimmy once played mischief with her cigarette lighter and she reacted angrily saying that “that all children were arsonists at heart” (16), but as she gradually lost interest in him, she ceased to get angry. As for Crake’s mother, “a diagnostician at the hospital complex,” she “was out a lot, or in a hurry” (88). In *MaddAddam* Zeb claims that Glenn’s parents were so absorbed in their professional careers that they had not much time for their son, who thereupon was “relegated to a footnote or else a trading card” (236). This lack of attention can be set in contrast with the calculated ill-treatment on the part of Zeb’s father, who was sometimes deliberately “hurtful” to his two children, born by two different mothers, because he “thought pain was good” for them (108). Zeb’s mother, twice described by Snowman as “not a kind person,” was “not very interested in small children” (108). She would tell her son “You will be the death of me,” thus using a metaphor which the Crakers listening to Snowman’s account of “The Story of the Birth of Zeb” find hard to understand (109).

The two female protagonists of *The Year of the Flood* (2009) also had difficult childhoods. Ren was an only child uprooted from her home by her mother, Lucerne, who took the girl away when she became involved in a passionate love affair with Zeb. Accordingly, Ren portrayed herself as a vulnerable chick which was swiftly kicked out of

the nest (294) and felt that her mother “blew [her] off like if [she] was a piece of lint” (301). As for Toby, her mother died from a mysterious illness, and her father committed suicide soon after. Rendered sterile after an infection contracted when selling her eggs to a fertility clinic, Toby fulfils her mothering desires when she joins the God’s Gardeners, an environmental religious sect that implements an effective communal approach to child-raising and allows her to take care of other orphans, who nuzzle her like “rabbits from Mars” (42). Amanda, one of these orphans, is described with three different metaphors which are used in the same paragraph to evince three distinct attitudes towards the girl. Ren envisions her as “a stray kitten,” Lucerne brands her “a wild dog [which] could never be trained or trusted,” and Zeb labels her “a hothouse flower” (78). Amanda is a *pleebrat*, that is, a brat of the *pleebs*, the dangerous cities where “it was rumoured, the kids ran in packs, in hordes” (*Oryx and Crake* 73). The disparity between the portrayal of the impoverished *pleebrats* and that of the wealthy children living in safe gated Compounds is a striking feature of the MaddAddam trilogy, a new aspect in Atwood’s depiction of fictional children, who generally belong to the middle class. Despite their dissimilitude, the *pleebrats* and the children of the Compounds cannot be seen in simplistic binaries (e.g. of good and evil), as Jane Bone has convincingly argued in her article “Environmental Dystopias: Margaret Atwood and the Monstrous Child.” Since they all share basic human traits and coexist in the same world, they have a great deal in common, including the risk of being figuratively appraised in negative terms both by adults and by other children.

In contrast with the predominant negative set of metaphors, which incorporates a wide range of monsters and hideous animals, there is a much shorter list of favorable representations of children in Atwood’s fiction. An obvious feature shared by some positive metaphors of children is that they belong to the past (often mythologized) rather than to the present. These coveted children only exist in the memory or in the imagination of Atwood’s characters. For instance, the unnamed protagonist and first-person narrator of *Surfacing*, who is traumatized by her recent experience of abortion, says about her parents: “They were from another age, prehistoric, when everyone got married and had a family, children growing in the yard like sunflowers; remote as Eskimoes or mastodons” (138). At this point, she deludes herself by assuming that her parents lived in a period when children were not taught about evil and were commonly perceived as lovely creatures that embellished their

parents' homes and never caused any nuisance or inconvenience. Her choice of this floral simile is accurate because the pleasurable activity of raising flowers is conventionally compared with that of raising children, and also because at that time many North-American people were fond of brightening their gardens with sunflowers, which are fast-growing and easy to cultivate. The novel as a whole, however, reveals to what extent the apparent family bliss evoked by the protagonist-narrator proves deceptive. This naïve deception is substantiated, among other significant details, by the fact that she was not even mentioned in her mother's diary, evidence which caused disappointment to her at her mother's deathbed (16).

Apart from being placed in an unattainable past, pleasant representations of children sometimes belong to dreams, illusions or to what might have been but never was in fact. For instance, two beautiful metaphors about stillborn or unborn children are twice used close together in one of the short stories contained in *Dancing Girls*, "The Resplendent Quetzal," which is about the deep emotional experiences undergone by a young married couple concerning their baby, who "had died at birth," in spite of being "a perfect child" according to the doctor (149). While vacationing in Mexico with his wife, Edward, obsessed with bird-watching, finds consolation over his loss when he sees an oriole, which reminds him of how "the Aztecs thought hummingbirds were the souls of dead warriors" (154) and wonders if such birds might also be the souls of the unborn. He ponders: "'A jewel, a precious feather,' they called an unborn baby, according to *The Daily Life of the Aztecs. Quetzal, that was feather*" (154). Later in the story, Edward employs the same two metaphors—"A jewel, a precious feather"—again as he likens much-longed-for or lost babies to the precious birds eagerly sought by bird-watchers in the sense that "[t]hey came when they wanted to, not when you wanted them to. They came when you least expected it" (156).

Another clear example that illustrates how a mother idealizes the daughter she has lost forever can be found in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Offred describes her only daughter, who has been taken away from her and given in adoption without her consent, whose absence she mourns and whom she sees in a picture briefly shown to her, as if she were "an angel" (49). In the same novel, a Commander's Wife, who is sterile but has been able to have a healthy child thanks to her Handmaid's acting as a surrogate mother, "looks down at the baby as if it's a bouquet of flowers: something she's won, a tribute" (136). Likening a baby to a

bouquet of flowers may often be considered a positive comparison, but in the context of this dystopian novel such a comparison reinforces the idea that the baby is being treated as a commodity (albeit a beautiful one), as an object of pride for the woman who has not conceived it, but “won” it as if it were a “tribute.” Atwood also casts doubts about another seemingly favorable comparison which, on reflection, proves inaccurate. Nell, the eleven-year-old protagonist-narrator of “The Art of Cooking and Serving” (2005), one of the stories collected in *Moral Disorder* (2006), is knitting the layette for her unborn baby sister and at the same time reading about perfect domesticity. At the beginning of the story Nell fixates on an idealized metaphorical conceptualization of babies: “Babies dressed in layettes, I knew from the pictures in the Beehive pattern book, were supposed to resemble confectionary—clean and sweet, delicious little cakelike bundles decorated with pastel icing” (11). However, Nell will humorously challenge this idyllic perception afterwards, as she proceeds to disclose the mixed feelings which are generally ascribed to most expectant mothers in Atwood’s fiction, and at the age of fourteen, she ends up boldly refusing to share with her mother the burden of nurturing her ever-demanding little sister.

Atwood draws particular attention to the familiar metaphor CHILDREN ARE GIFTS FROM GOD in *Life Before Man*. The full name of Nate, one of its three protagonists, is Nathaniel, which precisely means ‘gift of God’ in Hebrew. His widowed mother feels proud to have chosen a name which suits him perfectly, but his wife expresses her disagreement in sarcastic terms once their marriage is over. She presumes a sort of conspiracy between mother and son “to pretend he wasn’t actually born, not like everyone else” and comically refers to her change of attitude towards the “gift” she received at her wedding: “Thanks a lot, God, Elizabeth said later, genially then. And later less genially” (50). Leaving divine matters aside and focusing on her happy marriage and marvelous pregnancy, in *Cat’s Eye* Elaine Risley puzzles over whether her beloved daughter Sarah is a gift she has given to her husband or else a gift he has allowed her to have (340).

Children can be metaphorically referred to by strangers in favorable terms when they become an object of pity, because they have been abandoned, ill-treated or have suffered the misfortune of orphanhood. The protagonist of *Alias Grace*, a novel which displays the negative views of infancy mentioned above, remembers how she and her orphaned siblings were comforted by their landlady Mrs. Burt, a childless widow.

Grace recalls, “She would gaze at us wistfully and call us poor motherless lambs or little angels, though we were ragged enough and none too clean either” (125–26). Readers realize why Mrs. Burt’s overused metaphors about children are subjected to such an ironic treatment by Grace, whose adult narrative voice soon discloses that the consolation of the orphans was part of the widow’s ultimately failed scheme to marry their father. Likewise, in *The Blind Assassin*, eighty-two-year-old Iris records with a long-standing feeling of resentment how people called her younger sister Laura “poor lamb” because they thought that she was not yet aware that her mother had died (97). In both novels readers are led to call into question the suitability and expose the sentimentality of the conceptual metaphor CHILDREN ARE LAMBS, which in these two cases could be rephrased as LITTLE ORPHANS ARE LAMBS.

Far from sentimentalizing the theme of orphanhood, Atwood has handled it with comic virtuosity in a powerful and thought-provoking prose piece entitled “Orphan Stories,” collected in *The Tent* (2006). Most of its short eleven sections invite readers to revise their conceptions and misconceptions by reassessing well-known stories of orphans, but the sixth (which is the shortest section, comprising only five lines) exclusively focuses on a very poignant visual image, conveyed by means of an original simile:

On the other hand how sad, to make your way like a snail, a very fast snail but a snail nonetheless, with no home but the one on your back, and that home an empty shell. A home filled with nothing but yourself. It’s heavy, that lightness. It’s crushing, that emptiness. (29–30)

The extended simile of the orphan as a snail stands apart from the two coherent sets into which most metaphorical expressions referring to children in Atwood’s fiction can be grouped. The list of favourable representations of children (as sunflowers, jewels, feathers, angels, gifts and lambs) is much shorter and less prominent than the negative series, which includes red shrivelled prunes, leeches, octopuses covered with suckers, barnacles encrusting a ship, limpets clinging to a rock, squids, flounders, throwbacks, reptiles, mutants, the secret weapon, giant caterpillars, white grubs, beluga whales and even an enormous mouth eating away at the mother from the inside. This imbalance is due to the fact that, in her novels and short stories, children appear as beneficent agents or as a cause for joy much less frequently than in the guise of menacing presences or objects of

fear for their families (especially for their mothers and sisters) and for other children. Such a striking imbalance is even more pronounced if we consider that most of the agreeable metaphorical expressions related to children (including beautiful flowers and precious gifts) correspond to ingenuous perceptions and eventually turn out to be proven wrong.

In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) Atwood dealt rather extensively with the motif of “the Great Canadian Baby,” which she deemed as a literary institution in her country (207). While acknowledging the existence of some “good babies, babies whose arrival signals spiritual rebirth for the other characters,” she cited a long list of examples of “‘bad’ babies, like the endless series of infants that keep appearing like little piglets, born to nonentity mothers” (207–08). Emphasizing the abundance of “exhausting miscarriages and deaths in childbirth” in Canadian novels, she came to the conclusion that “the Great Canadian Baby is sometimes alarmingly close to the Great Canadian Coffin” (208). Paradoxically, what she said (with a touch of sarcasm) in this respect about her fellow novelists would later be applicable to her subsequent works of fiction, in which babies and children seldom bring happiness, but often cause affliction and even provoke their mothers’ death, as in the cases of Grace’s mother and Mary Whitney in *Alias Grace* and Iris Chase’s mother in *The Blind Assassin*. Through her career as a literary critic Atwood has made further comments about the portrayal of babies and children in the works of other writers. In her introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 1989*, reprinted in her collection *Writing with Intent* (2005), she drew special attention to “White Angel,” highlighting that its narrator is described in Michael Cunningham’s story as a “criminally advanced nine-year-old” boy (75). Additionally, Atwood made some thought-provoking remarks not only about “the smelly, dark, tyrannical, and terrifying hell” in which the children of Barbara Gowdy’s “Disneyland” were imprisoned by their father, but also about the life of the “two poor-white boys abandoned by their runaway mother” in Mark Richard’s “Strays” and the child under the spell of “his fragile, manic-depressive mother” in Dale Ray Phillips’s “What Men Love For” (76). Atwood’s introduction shows her deep interest in the “fine stories that concern themselves with the terrors, and sometimes the delights, of childhood and with the powerlessness of children caught under the gigantic, heedless feet of the adult world” (76).

Since Atwood’s literary treatment of childhood is unrelated to her personal experiences as a mother and daughter, autobiographical aspects do

not need to be addressed. The writer herself has explained that she had “to use other people’s dreadful childhoods” as sources of inspiration when dealing with this topic (Lyons 226). Indeed, her fictional works demonstrate that she has looked beyond her immediate surroundings in order to survey the radical alteration in attitudes towards the themes of childhood and parent-child relations which has taken place in today’s society. Both dissatisfaction with one’s own past childhood and anxiety about the mysteries of present or future parenthood have provoked a dramatic shift in sensitivity which is accurately reflected by her characters. Atwood does not merely mirror reality throughout her fictional writings, but projects her satiric vision while bringing keen insight into complex issues such as these. As traditional conceptions of childhood and children come under her attack, she encourages the rejection of clichés and promotes the critical questioning of certainties. In truth, her distinctive portrayal of childhood, which is vividly conveyed through a wide range of metaphorical conceptualizations, heightens readers’ awareness and raises troubling concerns about a life stage whose enigmas remain unsolved.

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