

**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL  
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS**

**NATÁLIA PACHECO SILVEIRA**

**BETWEEN CANVAS AND WORD: AUTHORSHIP AND PERSPECTIVE IN  
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *CAT'S EYE***

**PORTO ALEGRE  
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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado ao  
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**ORIENTADORA: PROFA. DRA. SANDRA SIRANGELO MAGGIO**

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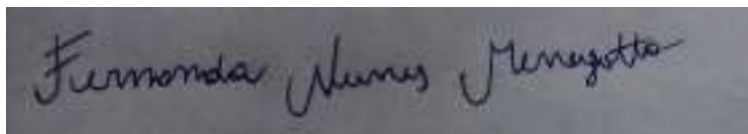
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*Cat's Eye***

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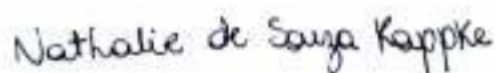
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**BANCA EXAMINADORA:**



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Profa. Me. Fernanda Nunes Menegotto  
Doutoranda em Estudos de Literatura no PPG Letras UFRGS



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Profa. Nathalie de Souza Kappke  
Mestranda em Estudos de Literatura no PPG Letras UFRGS



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Profa. Dra. Sandra Sirangelo Maggio (orientadora)  
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

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*Reality simply consists of different points of view.*

Margaret Atwood, Interview.

## RESUMO

*Cat's Eye* (1988), de Margaret Atwood, traz a autobiografia ficcional de Elaine Risley, influente pintora canadense que retorna a sua cidade natal, Toronto, para uma exposição retrospectiva de sua carreira. A partir de um relato autobiográfico, Risley narra, em primeira pessoa, sua trajetória como mulher, desde a infância, até assumir seus papéis como artista e mãe. Essa narrativa é traduzida tanto em palavras quanto em pinturas — representadas por descrições epigramáticas. À vista disso, a história de Risley se constrói em *Cat's Eye* tanto através da narrativa autobiográfica quanto da descrição das pinturas. Nesse contexto, o objetivo da presente monografia é analisar como a autoria e a perspectiva se manifestam neste romance, levando em consideração os dois meios e analisando como se constroem o foco e o ponto de vista adotados. Para tal, a primeira seção da monografia elabora questões sobre a maneira como a autoria se manifesta no romance, abordando certas implicações da escrita de uma autobiografia ficcional, e discute os papéis de leitor e autor, autora e pintora. A segunda seção analisa como a perspectiva é utilizada de modo a transmitir, por meio do relato autobiográfico e das pinturas, os significados e eventos da vida da protagonista, bem como sua posição na sociedade em que se insere. Como lastro de apoio para as questões de autoria lanço mão dos críticos Cooke (1992), Hite (1995) e Ingersoll (1991). Para estudo da perspectiva dentro da obra utilizo De Jong (1998), Dvorák (2001) e Vickroy (2005). Também recorro a textos secundários e a ideias expressas pela própria Atwood, uma autora que com frequência escreve sobre o ato de escrever. Ao término do trabalho, as contribuições esperadas são a ampliação dos debates sobre autoria, sobre perspectiva e sobre a obra de Atwood, a partir da análise de um de seus romances mais complexos.

**Palavras-chave:** Literaturas de língua inglesa. Literatura canadense. Margaret Atwood. Autoria. Perspectiva. Literatura e pintura.



## ABSTRACT

*Cat's Eye* (1988), by Margaret Atwood, features the fictional autobiography of Elaine Risley, an influential Canadian painter who returns to her hometown, Toronto, for a retrospective exhibition of her career. In her autobiographical account, Risley narrates, in first person, her trajectory as a woman, from childhood, until assuming her roles as an artist and mother. This narrative is translated into both words and paintings — represented by epigrammatic descriptions. In view of this, Risley's story is built in *Cat's Eye* both through the autobiographical narrative and the description of the paintings. In this context, the objective of this monograph is to analyze how authorship and perspective are approached in this novel, taking into account the two media and analyzing how the adopted focus and point of view are constructed. To this end, the first section of the monograph raises questions about the way authorship is manifested in the novel, addressing certain implications of a writing of a fictional autobiography, and discusses the roles of reader and author, author and painter. The second section analyzes how perspective is used in order to convey, through the autobiographical account and paintings, the meanings and events of the protagonist's life, as well as her position in the society in which she is inserted. As theoretical support for authorship issues, I use the critics Cooke (1992), Hite (1995) and Ingersoll (1991). To study perspective within the work I use De Jong (1998), Dvorák (2001) and Vickroy (2005). I also use secondary texts and ideas expressed by Atwood herself, an author who frequently writes about the act of writing. The expected contributions of this work are the expansion of the debate on authorship, on perspective, and on Atwood's work, based on the analysis of one of her most complex novels.

**Keywords:** English literatures. Canadian literature. Margaret Atwood. Authorship. Perspective. Literature and painting.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	11
<b>1. AUTHORSHIP ISSUES: <i>CAT'S EYE'S</i> MANY FACES</b> .....	15
<b>1.1 Meaning is in the Eye of the Beholder</b> .....	15
<b>1.2 Now You See Me: The Autobiographical Lure in <i>Cat's Eye</i></b> .....	21
<b>2. PERSPECTIVE ISSUES: ELAINE RISLEY'S MANY FACES</b> .....	27
<b>2.1 Life-Sized Girls: Sexism and Authority in <i>Cat's Eye</i></b> .....	27
<b>2.2 Weaving Through Painting and Narrative</b> .....	34
<b>2.3 Vision and Visions: The Use of Mirrors</b> .....	36
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	43
<b>WORKS CITED</b> .....	46

**TABLE OF FIGURES**

Figure 1	Watchbird in the children's dental health week magazine	Year: 1953 Available at: <a href="https://libwww.freelibrary.org/blog/post/1404">https://libwww.freelibrary.org/blog/post/1404</a> Access on: 3 Nov. 2021.	p. 31
Figure 2	<i>The Arnolfini Marriage</i> , by Jan van Eyck	Painter: Jan van Eyck Year: 1434 Oil painting on oak Dimensions: 82.2cm x 60cm National Gallery, London Available at: <a href="https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait">https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait</a> Access on: 3 Nov. 2021	p.37
Figure 3	<i>Cat's Eye's Unified Field Theory</i> book cover, representing the painting	Cover artist: T.M Craan, design; Jamie Bennet, illustration McClelland & Stewart's 1988 hardback edition of <i>Cat's Eye</i> Available at: <a href="https://bityli.com/Wp2r10">https://bityli.com/Wp2r10</a> Access on: 3 Nov. 2021	p. 40

## INTRODUCTION

After going to the library and borrowing several books by Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye* was the first I chose to read, although it is not among the author's most famous works. Even though we should not judge a book by its cover, I was intrigued by the illustration of a woman in a cloak, holding a marble and floating above a bridge with the universe under it. That mysterious image caught my attention, and that is how I entered the fictional world of *Cat's Eye*, which did not disappoint me. Elaine Risley's story so fascinated me, that I finished the book within a few days. After this, I read other books by Atwood, which affected me in different ways, but *Cat's Eye* remained the one I am still busy trying to decodify.

In the last two years I have been studying different aspects of this novel, such as how *Cat's Eye* adapts and updates the genre *Künstlerroman*, having a woman as a protagonist; or how narrative and painting interact in the novel. All the considerations I made while studying these topics ended up pointing to two predominant themes: authorship and point of view. That is why I decided to organize these ideas in my undergraduate monograph, where I could have space to deepen my considerations about the novel's plot and structure, and on Atwood's role as an author.

*Cat's Eye* was first published in 1988, and it introduces us to the fictive autobiography<sup>1</sup> of Elaine Risley, a fictional influential Canadian painter. The artist is honored with a retrospective exhibit of her life's work, to be held in Toronto, her hometown. In this sense, the return to her city offers Risley the opportunity to revisit her life trajectory as an artist, as a woman, and as a mother, beginning with her early childhood years. The retrospective episodes are intercalated with Risley's preparation for her exhibition, during the present, in a much-known Atwood style. In this sense, like other Atwood novels, such as *The Blind Assassin*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Oryx and Crake*, *Cat's Eye* mixes episodes that happened in different contexts. Banerjee (1990) asserts that the narrative is not formed of conventional *flashbacks*: instead, it is a braid, caused by the event of Elaine being able to face her trauma — her childhood persecution —, something she had never done before. In summary, by mixing these episodes, this narrative braid can

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<sup>1</sup> This term is coined by Cooke (1992).

be defined as the psychological story of a defensive denial, its consequences and its overcoming.

The way the novel is structured is attuned with the process of plunging into the self Risley goes through all the chapters — except for the first, second, tenth, and the last one— are named after Risley’s paintings which are being exposed. The tenth chapter, although it does not represent any of Risley’s works, is called *Life Drawing*. It refers to a drawing course taken by the protagonist when she was in college. Considering this, I argue that the autobiographical account can be organized both by the narrative and by Risley’s paintings, since the events which inspired these paintings are represented in those chapters. In this sense, the scenarios depicted by Risley’s paintings also form a narrative, and are organized as one, following a chorological order. In the novel, Risley explains in detail how she conceives and executes her paintings, providing comments on the colors, shapes, compositions and techniques chosen. On this account, the paintings are made available to the reader by *ekphrasis*, which means the verbal representation of a visual representation. In other words, *ekphrasis* is a literary description of art — a painting of a picture with words —, which stages an encounter between representations in two mediums, one visual and one verbal (Oregon State University, 2021).

Moving forward, it is also important to consider Atwood’s role as an author, since, in my opinion, her influence has a notable — and even principal — part in the significance of *Cat’s Eye*. In this sense, there is an important aspect to be considered: the resemblance between Atwood and Risley. Both women are successful mature artists, at the top of their careers. Risley is a first-person narrator revisiting her own life in a book that seems much like an autobiography, whereas Atwood is an author who has been always involved with visual arts.

For these reasons, it is of my interest to investigate autobiographical aspects inside the novel, since they have a direct influence on questions regarding authorship and perspective. Many readers and critics tend to analyze Atwood’s works through biographical lenses, implying that her characters and scenarios are mostly based on her own life<sup>2</sup>. Hence, through the striking similarities between Atwood and Risley, I see an autobiographical lure, which is appropriated by the author to say that it is not possible — and it does not matter —

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<sup>2</sup> Cooke (1992) comments directly on this subject, by bringing an interview in which Atwood has to affirm that she is not so crazy as the character in *Surfacing*, or so fat as the character in *Lady Oracle*, and so on. Such comparisons lead to the thought that all female protagonists written by Atwood are herself.

if she is Elaine Risley, or any other protagonist. That is, Atwood reinforces that it is not possible to identify the limits between what is factual and non-factual — or, in other words, what is based or not on the author's life — in Risley's trajectory, and this movement ratifies the fact that these biographical implications should not determine how the novel is read.

Atwood is also known as an author associated with visual arts: there are many self-portraits made by her, and she clearly has a wide knowledge of Canadian visual artists, since she provides an ample list of artists that served as inspiration for the paintings described in *Cat's Eye*. On top of that, she is also the author of a graphic novel called *Angel Catbird*, along with Johnnie Christmas and Tamra Bonvillain. Although Atwood did not illustrate the book, some editions include previously unpublished art by the author.

Considering these two main topics which guide my analysis, in the first chapter I examine how authorship is portrayed in the novel, in view of the two authorship levels in the narrative — Atwood as a writer, and Risley as a painter —, and how the debate on the roles of artist and reader/seer is presented. To do so, I bring in the theoretical support from Cooke (1992, 2000), and Hite (1995), and contributions by Atwood herself on the act of writing, such as Atwood (2015, 2018).

Afterwards, on the second chapter I move to the analysis of the importance of point of view in the novel, having in mind how the narrative and the paintings represented portray the events lived by the protagonist, and the role of point of view in translating these events. For this part of the study, the works of Banerjee (1990), De Jong (1998), Dvorák (2001), Ingersoll (1990), and Vickroy (2005) are used. When necessary, I also draw theoretical support from authors who have studied works by some of the artists referenced in the novel, such as Rabinovitz (1980), and Sybesma-Ironside (1985), since these artists and works are related to Risley's trajectory as an artist and to her paintings.

In conclusion, the purpose of delving on how the novel approaches both authorship and perspective issues is to comprehend how these two elements are discussed and presented by the author, considering some of the main topics brought up in relation to each one: how the roles of reader, writer, painter, and seer are presented; what are the implications of a writing of a fictional autobiography, especially by such a known author as Atwood; how the novel discusses sexism and power dynamics through the lens of perspective; the interfaces between narrative and painting in *Cat's Eye*, and, finally, what

role mirrors play in this scenario, representing one of the resources the protagonist uses to imprint her point of view through paintings. .

## 1. AUTHORSHIP ISSUES: *CAT'S EYE'S* MANY FACES

The first section of this monograph is dedicated to the study of how authorship is presented and discussed in *Cat's Eye*, considering the author's position as a writer and Risley's position as a painter. To this end, I also comment on the roles of reader and seer, and on the autobiographical approaches to the novel, which influence how Atwood's authorship can be interpreted.

Banerjee (1990) pertinently asserts one of the central aspects of *Cat's Eye*: as many of Atwood's works, *Cat's Eye* has more than one face and tells more than one story. This statement is to be associated with various aspects of the novel — including Risley's painting titled *Half a Face*<sup>3</sup>, the many references to mirrors, the dynamic between Risley and Cordelia, apparently two opposites that change places throughout life, or, finally, the ambivalence of the work itself, which plays with facts from Atwood's own life, and, consequently, with the fact that autobiographical fiction is truer than other genres (INGERSOLL, 1991), and with the very concepts of what is true and real within the book (HITE, 1995). In this sense, I will analyze some of these dynamics inside the novel, and how they are presented and tensioned, providing an interesting outlook on what it means to be an artist.

### 1.1. Meaning is in the Eye of the Beholder

To begin with, it is important to define how authorship will be discussed in this monograph, since I decided to consider both Atwood's and Risley's processes of authorship. Risley is seen both as the author of her paintings, and as the fictive author of her text — which is written in the first person. At the same time, we have Margaret Atwood as the author of the novel, and, consequently, as the author of the author of the paintings represented in it. The juxtaposition of these two levels of authorship reinforces the novel's status as a work which discusses art and the artist (HITE, 1995), as well as its

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<sup>3</sup> “This is the only picture I ever did of Cordelia, Cordelia by herself. *Half a Face*, it's called: an odd title, because Cordelia's entire face is visible. But behind her, hanging on the wall, like emblems in the Renaissance, or those heads of animals, moose or bear, you used to find in northern bars, is another face, covered with a white cloth. The effect is of a theatrical mask. Perhaps” (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 3518).



connection to Atwood's own relation to her work and to other arts, such as drawing painting and photography. According to Hite, when reading *Cat's Eye*, for painter, read writer; for writer, read writer of *this novel*. In summary, my choice here is to consider authorship in two levels: internal, which pays respect to Risley's authorship inside the fictional world of the text, and external, which pays respect to Atwood's authorship.

Having these considerations in mind, *Cat's Eye's* discussion of the roles of reader & author, or, as in Elaine's paintings, of the artist and the seer, can be associated not only with events presented inside the narrative, but also with the fact that the novel is, as previously mentioned,

about art and the artist, and in particular about Margaret Atwood's own art and its relation to Margaret Atwood's own life. The implications of all these other themes as they are developed in the novel make this relationship particularly complicated and problematic, setting up two opposed accounts of the relations between artist and viewer or reader, and leading to two opposed accounts of the relations between autobiography and meaning in an aesthetic work. (HITE, 1995, p. 151)

In this sense, *Cat's Eye* many times opposes the artist's account and intentions and the public's interpretations. One of the scenarios in which this tension is represented very well is when Risley is confronted with different interpretations of her work. Charna, the gallerist who organizes the artist's retrospective exhibition, writes comments on each of Risley's paintings, focusing on her main themes, characters, and symbols. The artist's first reaction is mainly of denial towards these comments, as I will comment further.

Regarding this, there are two main factors to be considered. To begin with, the reader has a privileged view of Risley's life through her autobiographical account, that is, the meaning of some of these paintings, beyond Charna's analysis, is also made clear. Further, "At the same time (...) *Cat's Eye* itself is built up of these autobiographical interpretations, inasmuch as the stories that motivated each painting are the key components of the narrative comprising the novel as a whole." (HITE, 1995, p. 153). In other words, because the novel is organized through Risley's paintings, which name the chapters, a movement which corroborates the equivalence between the events in the character's life and the canvases representing them, there is a tendency to privilege the painter's perspective on her own works, which is ratified by the novel's own structure.

Her painting plays a crucial role in her development in the novel. Elaine's early life is recorded in her artwork: the early portraits depict the women who most influenced her formative years in domestic situations characterized by surreal, carnival elements, or rendered in caricature. Elaine puts the fragments of her life together in a new order as intimated in her brother's scientific theories: "'When we gaze at the night sky,' he says, 'We are looking at fragments of the past'." Elaine's paintings are just such fragments of her past and play a major role in the way that they bear meaning in relation to the present. (MCWILLIAMS, 2007, p. 31)

However, the protagonist's strangely naive posture, always resorting to biographical interpretation (for instance, "it was just my mother/brother/neighbor") is not able to take away the logical basis on which Charna makes her appointments. In other words, both perspectives — the artist's and the seer's — are equally legitimate, even though Risley's reaction is of despair. On this topic, the artist declares: "Because I can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean. Whatever energy they have come out of me. I'm what's left over" (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 6369).

Risley's response shows how she feels drained not only by her own paintings, but also by the fact that she is no longer able to tell their meaning, that is, to control how these paintings are seen. The fact that she considered herself to be "what's left over" of these works also implies how she sees herself as an artist. Hite provides pertinent comments on this topic:

The teen-aged Elaine had been uncomfortable with the loss of control attendant on "knowing too much about other people," a situation in which "you are forced to understand their reasons for doing things and then you are weakened" (233). But in the narrative development of *Cat's Eye*, this source of disciplinary weakness emerges as a precondition for artistic strength, at least according to the more comprehensive if perhaps utopian definition of art that evolves from Elaine's own reassessments of her work. By this definition, a work of art, whether a painting or a novel, involves understanding far more about people than is consonant with a social structure of surveillance, judgment, and blame. People's "reasons for doing things" make the processes of representation and interpretation more complicated and more far-reaching. Moreover, the increase in complexity and magnitude guarantees that knowing "too much about people" is at the same time never knowing enough." (HITE, 1995, p. 149)

In this respect, complementing previous statements about the nature of the artist's and public's stance, Hite exposes how resorting to biographical approaches can be problematical. That is, if the public was able to know more about Risley's life — or any artist's life, for that matter —, and about the intentions behind her work, this would not necessarily mean that they would provide more accurate observations on the artist's work.

As also mentioned by Hite, this scenario represents a process in which knowing more — about an artist’s life, context, and meanings — is at the same time not knowing enough. This, however, does not mean that these more far-reaching interpretations do not or should not exist.

As an example of this contrast in the novel, there is *One Wing*’s exhibition. Risley claims that the painting has no meaning beyond the biographical, which would refer to the fact that her brother Stephen was taken hostage and killed during a hijacked flight by terrorists, who forced him to jump out of the plane. None of the people who have seen and analyzed Risley’s work know about this event, and the analysis published by Charna claims that the painting is “a statement about men, and the youthful nature of war” (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 6341). Having this in mind, the novel’s description of *One Wing* is,

I painted it for my brother, after his death. It’s a triptych. There are two smaller, flanking side panels. In one is a World War Two airplane, in the style of a cigarette card; in the other is a large pale green luna moth. In the larger, central panel, a man is falling from the sky. That he is falling and not flying is clear from his position, which is almost upside-down, slantwise to the few clouds; nevertheless he appears calm. He is wearing a World War Two RCAF uniform. He has no parachute. In his hand is a child’s wooden sword. This is the kind of thing we do, to assuage pain (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 6341).

Charna’s *One Wing* analysis is at least reasonable, considering the symbols chosen by the painter: the military ship, the cigarette card style of illustration<sup>4</sup>, the toy sword, even the free fall itself. Hite also highlights Risley’s choice of symbols, especially the use of the moth, which justifies this type of approach,

Despite the criticism implied by the juxtaposition [of Charna’s and Risley’s view of the word], the two statements are not necessarily opposed. The World War II airplane and the luna moth of the flanking panels are both images of flight referring to situations in which Stephen was unable to see himself as endangered. The airplane recalls his childhood fascination with the war (...) The luna moth is part of a dense network of motifs connecting themes of flight, vulnerability, mutilation, and hope. (HITE, 1995, p. 152)

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<sup>4</sup> Cigarette companies issued cigarette cards between the years of 1875 and 1940. These cards were designed to stiffen cigarette packaging and advertise cigarette brands. The companies often included collectible cards with their packages of cigarettes, with illustrations documenting popular culture from the turn of the century.

Considering this analysis and having in mind the previous statements on the contrast between the artist's and the public's interpretation, it is interesting to emphasize that both the autobiographical and the external interpretations are equally important and valid in this context. In this regard, just as exemplified by Hite, Charna's analysis would not necessarily change if she knew the inspiration behind Risley's painting. Moreover, the fact that Risley bases herself in an event from her own life also does not take away the fact that she is still able to build meaning in an intelligible way. That is, the artist manages to translate her personal experience into the composition and its symbols, which can be seen and interpreted by the public. Her choices are not based solely on Stephen's death, since she included many symbols, as previously mentioned, that would not represent just literally what happened during this event, but also its cultural and metaphorical significance, which goes along with one of the novel's main themes: "Perhaps more than any other Atwood novel, *Cat's Eye* is preoccupied with detail, with a proliferation of social and cultural observations about the postwar era (...)" (HITE, 1995, p. 138).

When Risley is confronted with the fact that her works do not mean to the public eye what they mean privately to her, she is uncomfortable and feels out of control.

The perspective, after all, is that of an artist who has been spirited away from her West Coast home to Toronto to attend a retrospective of her work. And if that isn't autumnal, not much is; as Elaine mordantly thinks, "first the retrospective, then the morgue." There is a very real sense, in *Cat's Eye*, that Elaine's paintings have been placed in a morgue of sorts, though it more commonly goes by the name of an art gallery. Later in the novel, as she walks through the rooms of the gallery, it's as though she is bringing life back to these paintings in the act of reviving their moments of creation and of their inspiration in her past. In order to do that, however, Elaine needs to resuscitate her work from layers of critical explication. (YORK, 2006, p. 33)

However, it is these specific tensions which create a complex and much interesting field when analyzing art works, as previously observed. Even though Risley needs to critically review her own life in order to deal with her childhood traumas, which would imply, as exposed by York, the need to remove her works from these "layers of critical explication", these same layers are also a representation of how Risley's works have meaningfully affected the public.

Atwood (2015) provides herself interesting insights not only on the act of writing, but also on the fact that writers — or, transposing these statements to *Cat's Eye*, artists — have a dual dimension: "All writers are double for the simple reason that you can never

actually meet the author of the book you have just read. Too much time has elapsed between composition and publication, and the person who wrote the book is now a different person.” (ATWOOD, 2015, p. 32). Atwood also complements: “To be a writer came to be seen as running the risk of being the invisible half of a doubles act, and possibly also a copy for which no authentic original existed.” (ATWOOD, 2015, p. 44). In this sense, it seems that Risley is afraid that her authentic original meanings are lost, although they are very alive, in the sense that the public continues to be touched and interested by her works. Moreover, Risley also possesses a double persona,

Elaine Risley cultivates different private and artistic personae. For example, there are two versions of Elaine the artist: the Art and Archaeology student and the serious artist who studies life-drawing outside of college hours. From the outset, Elaine plays with the expectations of the female artist in the same way that she responds to critical misconstructions of her work. Thus, to Josef, her Hungarian mentor and lover, she becomes a pre-Raphaelite fantasy, while to her first husband Jon, she takes on the guise of a disconsolate existentialist. These disguises are easily assumed and discarded according to circumstance. (MCWILLIAMS, 2007, p. 30)

Overall, the coexistence of these many forms of interpreting and presenting art works point out that *Cat's Eye* puts in evidence the fact that any artwork has a private and public dimension, as well as the artist. In this sense, both dimensions are relevant, however, contrarily to what happens with Risley, most people do not have access to artists' private intention and inspiration for their work. Moreover, despite these private motivations having an influence on the artists' creations, it is also relevant to point out that they do not define the art work's meaning, that is, one type of approach would not necessarily take away the meaning from the other. As put by Hite

These two positions on the roles of authorial and outside critical interpretation enact a constantly shifting power imbalance between the creator and the consumer of the artistic work. In *Cat's Eye*, as in many other Atwood novels, the main source of this imbalance is the limited first-person narrator, who is unreliable inasmuch as she cannot see enough-either of her own motivations and desires and the forces conditioning them, or of the consequences of certain of her choices. Elaine Risley's development is a growing awareness of the implications of both her feelings and her actions, but like other Atwood narrators she never comprehends as much as is at least theoretically available to the reader, who can intervene at crucial junctures to fill in. (HITE, 1995, p. 153)

To sum up, the previous discussion on the artist's and the public's interpretation can be defined as an interesting authorial movement by Atwood: “Of course, the narrator is not the author of the novel itself. Inasmuch as Elaine Risley is a figure in the text of *Cat's*

*Eye* her limitation is one manifestation of Margaret Atwood's thematic and formal control.” (HITE, 1995, p. 154). In other words, Atwood seems to intentionally reinforce this dynamic in order to discuss how authorship works inside and outside the novel, that is, also in regard to the writer's own works and its biographical approaches.

## 1.2 Now You See Me: The Autobiographical Lure in *Cat's Eye*

The discussion on meaning presented previously gains one more dimension when we consider the novel's status as a fictive biography. In this sense, Atwood's position as the writer of a novel which has the form of an autobiography leads to the tensioning of the limits between fictional and non-fictional. This, as I will further elaborate, also plays with the previous mentioned aspects of meaning and authorship, that is, with how the artist's and the public's perceptions are contrasted, and how an artwork cannot simply have its meaning dictated by the artist nor by the public.

Just as Atwood (2015), Cooke (2000) also reinforces that at some level all writers are double and have a public and a concealed side (COOKE, 2000). In the case of Atwood, because of her resistance to show her private life, readers and critics have been eager to know more about her concealed side, which leads to the numerous biographical interpretations of her work, and especially of *Cat's Eye*. Considering this, Cooke also brings interesting insights on how autobiography has been appropriated in the novel, and, more specifically, on how Atwood plays with her own position as an author: “When we read *Cat's Eye*, we are forced to redirect our attention from Atwood's presence or absence in this seemingly autobiographical text to ourselves and, in particular, to assumptions, about autobiographical fiction itself” (COOKE, 1992, p. 165-166).

To begin with, several points in Elaine's trajectory coincide with the author's life. The limit between the real and the fictional is called into question, not only taking into account the various autobiographical interpretations of Atwood's works, but also the unimportance of this limit for the novel's study and interpretation, since there is no way to objectively distinguish what actually came out of the author's life, in the same direction as previously stated by Hite: knowing these superficial facts from the author's life, or any other fact, will never be enough.

The common themes between Risley and Atwood, which provoke many of these readers and critics' biographical approach to the novel, as exposed by Cooke (1992), are explored by the author, who plays with the striking resemblance between the protagonist and herself. For instance, Risley's father is an entomologist, just as Atwood's father. Both lived their childhood in Canada's countryside — in a scenario filled with woods and ravines. The life story of Risley's brother resembles that of Atwood's brother. Risley is questioned about the relations between her work and feminism, as well as her trajectory as an artist in the 60s<sup>5</sup>. These and other resemblances indicate that *Cat's Eye* challenges the reader, in the sense that it draws attention to the prospect of the author within the text, however, not being less fictional than other Atwood works (COOKE, 1992).

This discussion can be also associated with how Atwood sees a gender implication in this general tendency of analyzing her work through biographical lenses. As commented by Ingersoll (1991),

At the center of this postmodern text is Atwood's complex use of her own past. Few writers have spoken out so vehemently against readings of their work as autobiography. As her interviews indicate, she is very aware that her audience is bent upon biographical readings of her fiction. With obvious amusement she tells how in question-and-answer sessions following her public readings she has often just finished disclaiming autobiographical roots for her characters (...) For Atwood, there are clearly gender implications here since, as she has argued, women have traditionally been thought so imaginatively impoverished that all they could write about was themselves. (INGERSOLL, 1991, p. 17-18)

Thus, *Cat's Eye* seems to clearly play with the type of public interpretation that Atwood has received, in the same way as the public and the private are discussed in relation to Risley's work. The painter's critics cannot have access to her private intentions, in the same manner that the readers of *Cat's Eye* also cannot have to Atwood's own intentions when writing the novel.

The novel's disclaimer also plays an important role in this:

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<sup>5</sup> In a much similar way, Atwood is also frequently questioned about her relation to feminism, since many of her works have been interpreted through feminist theory. However, the author has reservations about defining herself as feminist, as well as her work: "Is *The Handmaid's Tale* a 'feminist' novel? If you mean an ideological tract in which all women are angels and/or so victimized they are incapable of moral choice, no. If you mean a novel in which women are human beings — with all the variety of character and behavior that implies — and are also interesting and important, and what happens to them is crucial to the theme, structure and plot of the book, then yes. In that sense, many books are 'feminist.'" (ATWOOD, 2017, n. pag.).

This is a work of fiction. Although its form is that of an autobiography, it is not one. Space and time have been rearranged to suit the convenience of the book, and, with the exception of public figures, any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. The opinions expressed are those of the characters and should not be confused with the author's. (ATWOOD, 2009)

Among the information brought in the disclaimer, it is important to point out the addition made in *Cat's Eye*, which references the fact that although the novel has the form of an autobiography, it is not one. In this sense, it seems that either this part of the disclaimer is anticipating or responding to the many autobiographical approaches related to the novel. According to Ingersoll,

It is easy enough to see that Atwood is attempting to protect herself from potential legal action generated by former friends or associates who might choose to see themselves as models for the less appealing characters in *Cat's Eye*. However, the attempt to deny any connection with Elaine Risley must encourage the reader to suspect that the lady doth protest too much. In this way, part of the enjoyment of this text involves a shifting back and forth between invention and the facts of the inventor's past. (INGERSOLL, 1990, p. 18)

Regarding this, the novel's disclaimer seems to be confirming how it is possible to associate, in fact, the characters and events presented in the narrative with Atwood's own life. Cooke (1992) also asserts that the disclaimer makes the readers focus even more on the autobiographical elements in the novel. My understanding of this is that this movement is very intentional and represents the author's response to these many biographical approaches of her work. Ingersoll attests that

Atwood offers the informed reader the lure of a few well-known features of her own childhood and then proceeds to invent an autobiography which is the experience of Elaine Risley, a character who may bear only the most superficial similarities. Autobiography, even when intended, is obviously enough only another form of fiction. By offering us, in the words of the novel's preliminary note, a work of fiction whose form is that of an autobiography, she gives us a text which confirms that truth by showing how Elaine Risley has invented herself, constructed an autobiography, through her art. (INGERSOLL, 1990, p. 24)

In this scenario, there are two aspects to be considered. To begin with, the novel ratifies the relation between an artist's life and their creations, as considered in the first section of this chapter. In second place, the use of the autobiographical genre plays with the literary conventions usually associated with it, and with Atwood's own status as a literary



celebrity<sup>6</sup>. In other words, the narrative confirms that any artwork has a direct relation to the artist's life. At the same time, by having the form of an autobiography, *Cat's Eye* blurs the limits between what is known or not about the author's life.

In this regard, Cooke (1992) suggests a new form of interpreting how *Cat's Eye* incorporates and handles the genre:

One answer is that *Cat's Eye* is both fiction and autobiography: a 'fictive autobiography', to coin my own term, an autobiography composed by a fictional protagonist, which draws attention to its own problematical status as a fictive construct. (COOKE, 1992, p. 64)

On this subject, it is interesting to point out that not only Risley's position as an artist is tensioned and problematized, but also her status as the protagonist of a fictive autobiography, to use Cooke's term. In this respect, Atwood's authorship also has a problematical status, since

When we read *Cat's Eye*, we are forced to redirect our attention from Atwood's presence or absence in this seemingly autobiographical text to ourselves and, in particular, to our assumptions about autobiographical fiction itself. This is indeed a book about self-representation, and the reader's role is to reflect upon the various reflections of the self contained within in. (COOKE, 1992, p. 166)

In other words, the novel plays with our expectations regarding both autobiography and the author's presence in *Cat's Eye*, or any text. Regarding this, the novel plays "hide and seek" (COOKE, 1992) with Atwood's figure, tensioning how the reader is to perceive authorship inside the text. That is, the text leads to questions such as what relation the author has with it, what are the author's intentions, and how self-representative it is.

Respecting this topic, Atwood (2015) comments on how the figure of "the writer" is characterized:

What is the relationship between the two entities we lump under one name, that of 'the writer'? The particular writer. By *two*, I mean the person who exists when no writing is going forward — the one who walks the dog, eats bran for regularity, takes the car in to be washed, and so forth — and that other, more shadowy and altogether more equivocal personage who shares the same body,

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<sup>6</sup> York (2006) argues that Atwood is one of the few authors classified as a literary celebrity, being part of what is called "Margaret Atwood Inc." or the "Atwood industry".

and who, when no one is looking, takes it over and uses it to commit the actual writing. (ATWOOD, 2015, p. 30)

In this regard, the previous scenario of biographical interpretations of Atwood's works seem to express the public wish to have access not only to the author who "commits" the writing, but also the person who exists when no writing is happening. York provides interesting insights on this as well:

Atwood herself has also aided and abetted this mythologizing process by being rather tightfisted with details of her personal life, as is, of course, her right. Restricting free access to her privacy has been one of those complex adaptive responses to her stardom. It has both allowed her to preserve some time to herself, her writing, and her family, and it has also, ironically, fed the publicity machines. (YORK, 2006, p. 32)

However, these aspects do not take away the fact that there are biographical elements in *Cat's Eye*, or in any other Atwood work. That is, despite discussing the differences between the artist's and the public's interpretation, in the same manner that Risley's biographical relation to her works is as valid as Charna's commentary, the fact that it is not possible to estimate precisely how autobiographical the novel is does not annul the fact that it has, indeed, some autobiographical aspects. The question posited by the novel is *how* important these aspects should be when analyzing the author's work. In her book *On Writers and Writing* (2015), Atwood also addresses the biographical elements in *Cat's Eye*:

Many years later, I put Brown Owl into a book. There she is, still blowing her whistle and supervising the knot tests, in my novel *Cat's Eye*, for the same reason that a lot of things and people are put into books. That was in the 1980s, and I was sure the original Brown Owl must have been long dead by then. Then a few years ago a friend said to me, 'Your Brown Owl is my aunt.' 'Is?' I said. 'She can't possibly be alive!' But she was, so off we went to visit her. She was well over ninety, but Brown Owl and I were very pleased to see each other. (...)  
That's my first answer: the writer writes for Brown Owl, or for whoever the equivalent of Brown Owl may be in his or her life at the time. A real person, then: singular, specific. (ATWOOD, 2015, p. 135-136).

As commented by York, "Another Canadian writer, Alice Munro, put the case memorably when she observed that writers often use a bit of starter dough from the real world, but the cake that rises from the pan is, of course, another confection altogether" (YORK, 2006, p. 28). According to Atwood herself, there is always some biographical element in any writing. The fact that *Cat's Eye* presents these biographical elements in a

more straightforward way does not mean that the novel should or must be interpreted differently from other works, since “it is precisely the autobiographical aspect in and of *Cat’s Eye* that makes us resist our temptation to master the text” (COOKE, 1992, p. 168).

In conclusion, Hite’s contribution on the topic clarifies how these limits — or the lack of them — discuss such relevant matters as authorship, art, the artist, and, above all, self-representation:

In what may be the most nearly autobiographical moment in Atwood's work, it points to the limits of Atwood's art and to what is lost because of these limits, although it also insists that the loss is necessary and that the limits are also what make the acknowledgment of loss possible. The oxymoron of "autobiographical fiction" in *Cat's Eye* finally authorizes not a transgressive glimpse into some pre-existing private realm of the "real," but a reminder that the "self" of self-representation is always seer as well as seen, and that both seer and seen are implicated in the social construction of how one looks. (HITE, 1995, p. 155)

Considering the comment above, it is important to emphasize how the novel tensions different limits in art, which are related to both public and personal dimensions. In summary, while ratifying and contesting these bounds, the novel explores different levels of self-representation, and how meaningful they can be.

## 2. PERSPECTIVE ISSUES: ELAINE RISLEY'S MANY FACES

The current section is dedicated to the study of how perspective is presented and discussed in *Cat's Eye*. Being a novel about self-representation, as already mentioned by Hite (1995), both authorship and perspective issues have a main role in *Cat's Eye*. In this regard, I will investigate how perspective is associated in the novel with the following aspects: how Risley is perceived by the ones around her, especially by her childhood friends, Cordelia, Carol, and Grace; the process of Risley becoming an artist and being able to imprint her own perspective through her paintings; the interfaces between narrative and painting in the novel and its consequences to the novel's presentation and structure; and, finally, how Risley uses perspective in her own paintings, which is represented mainly through the use of mirrors. In summary, my goal here is to delve deeper on how perspective is relevant both in a more literal sense — that is, through the perspective strategies used in Risley's paintings, for instance — and in a more metaphorical sense — that is, analyzing how perspective affects the character's life and Risley's status as a painter in a society in which women are expected to be muses, not artists.

### 2.1 Life-Sized Girls: Sexism and Authority in *Cat's Eye*

To begin with, it is relevant to comment on how perspective is discussed in the novel through the lenses of sexism and authority. In this sense, not only Risley, but also all the women around her, as I will further expose, experience how others' comments have an influence on self-image. However, the novel presents how this repression is also transmitted through Risley's own childhood friends, as previously mentioned. Atwood (2009) provides a comment on this subject: "Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized" (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 1871-1872). In other words, the novel presents how these little girls can reproduce sexism by punishing Risley for not fitting into feminine standards, which, at the same time, are also imposed on them. In this regard,

*Cat's Eye* provides a bold and interesting outlook on how gender roles<sup>7</sup> are disseminated in our modern society.

Having lived in tents and motels, she and her mother must don the costumes and the roles appropriate to their gender and put away their unfeminine clothes and ungendered roles until the warm weather when they return to the North. Overnight Elaine feels like an alien from another planet. The future of painful socialization is represented by the doorway in her new school marked "GIRLS", the doorway which makes her wonder what the other one marked "BOYS" has behind it from which she has been shut out. (INGERSOLL, 1991, p. 20)

Risley is not able to automatically fit in this new world, thus, among her group of friends, she is taken as a martyr, that is, as the one chosen to be made more adequate to these norms, to suffer reprimands in order to fit their — and society's — standards. This experience has painful consequences on her and is the origin of a deep trauma<sup>8</sup>.

*Cat's Eye* (...) explores the complex interrelationship among trauma, identity and culture, and more specifically, how trauma shapes the social construction of the protagonist's gendered identity and the possible routes of creative expression in revealing and resisting such construction. Acknowledging trauma as an indicator and consequence of power relations, Atwood measures power's devastating effects on identity, compromised by a lost sense of agency that is unconsciously associated with death by trauma sufferers. (VICKROY, 2005, p. 1)

One important aspect mentioned by Vickroy is that this trauma does not only affect the protagonist's gendered identity, but also her art, that is, this experience is retaken through the artist's paintings. Further I will provide some reflections on how Risley's position as an artist has a connection to this.

Moving forward, among the reprimands Risley suffers, the character is obliged to look at herself in the mirror, and to watch how inadequate the way she talks, walks, and behaves is:

Cordelia brings a mirror to school. It's a pocket-mirror, the small plain oblong kind without any rim. She takes it out of her pocket and holds the mirror up in front of me and says, 'Look at yourself! Just look!' Her voice is disgusted, fed up, as if my face,

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<sup>7</sup> "Gender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on each society's values and beliefs about gender. Gender roles are the product of the interactions between individuals and their environments, and they give individuals cues about what sort of behavior is believed to be appropriate for what sex. Appropriate gender roles are defined according to a society's beliefs about differences between the sexes." (BLACKSTONE, 2003, p. 335).

<sup>8</sup> According to Caruth (1996), trauma is a shock that breaks in the mind's experience of time. This causes both the emotional suffering and the inability to identify or "locate" the meaning of the event.

all by itself, has been up to something, has gone too far. I look into the mirror but I don't see anything out of the ordinary. It's just my face, with the dark blotches on the lips where I've bitten of the skin" (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 2495-2497).

Cordelia, the leader of the friend group, the one who is responsible for demanding and performing these punishments, represents someone who Risley wants to impress the most. The protagonist is only capable of resignifying these events completely by the end of the novel, that is, in the moment in which she is capable of forgiving Cordelia:

There's a sound: a show against loose rock.  
It's time to go back. I push away from the cement wall, and the sky moves sideways. I know that if I turn, right now, and look ahead of me along the path, someone will be standing there. At first I think it will be myself, in my old jacket, my blue knitted hat. But then I see that it's Cordelia. She's standing halfway up the hill, gazing back over her shoulder. (...)  
I know she's looking at me, the lopsided mouth smiling a little, the face closed and defiant. There is the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the same knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were.  
I am the older now, I'm the stronger. If she stays here any longer she will freeze to death; she will be left behind, in the wrong time. It's almost too late.  
I reach out my arms to her, bend down, hands open to show I have no weapon. *It's all right*, I say to her. *You can go home now*. (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 6486-6496)

However, this closing is also an acknowledging of loss: "This is what I miss, Cordelia: not something that's gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea." (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 6517). Risley acknowledging that the negative feelings directed towards her during childhood are not their own seems to be a crucial step in the character's process of healing. This, along with the fact that Risley is the older one now, as mentioned, corroborates the fact that the protagonist was able to overcome and strengthen herself, however, still needing to have this closure even though Cordelia did not attend her exhibition. The need for Cordelia not to freeze "in the wrong time" is also a parallel between what happened to Risley herself as a child, when Cordelia threw her hat in the snow next to a river, causing Risley to fall and almost freeze to death. In this sense, the protagonist can be more merciful than her childhood friends, who ran away, leaving Risley to die<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> "Cordelia reaches out and pulls off my knitted hat. She marches the rest of the way down the hill and onto the bridge and hesitates for a moment. Then she walks over to the railing and throws my hat down into the ravine. (...) I look at her. She wants me to go down into the ravine where the bad men are, where we're never supposed to go. (...) I start down the steep hillside, holding onto branches and tree trunks. The path isn't even a real path, it's just a place worn by whoever goes up and down here: boys, men. Not girls. (...) I can hear water running somewhere, down under the ice. I step out onto the creek, reach for the hat, pick it up, go through. I'm up to my waist in the creek, slabs of broken ice up-ended around me.

The long path until this forgiving happens is also a hard one: Risley erases these difficult events for a long time<sup>10</sup>, and is only able to represent them through her paintings, which help the character to be able to move forward from the “bad time” (ATWOOD, 2009) she experienced. Nevertheless, it is only when Risley is confronted with returning home because of her retrospective exhibition that the artist can rethink these traumas more directly.

Elaine Risley's retrospective allows her to re-view the people and relationships that have been important to the first fifty years of her life. In reconstructing her past — or the critical years from age eight to young womanhood — Elaine Risley is in large part deconstructing that past. The consequences of that deconstruction — what turns out to be the novel itself — is a complicated series of transformations through which the persona discovers that the past is only what we continue to reconstruct for the purposes of the present. And perhaps beyond that, Elaine Risley discovers that of all her relationships — with the opposite sex and with her own — the most important may have been the strange friendship with her tormentor/double Cordelia. By the end of the narrative, the persona will have finally exorcised the spirit of an alter ego who was perhaps primarily that, another self whom she no longer needs to fear, hate, or even love. (INGERSOLL, 1991, p. 20)

Beyond some aspects already mentioned, it is interesting to point out that Ingersoll highlights how Risley is able to deconstruct the past. In other words, the protagonist deconstructs the persecution she suffered from her friends by imprinting her own perspective through her art, that is, by creating new meanings to her own experiences<sup>11</sup>, and by moving forward and making new meaningful relationships — including one with herself. The novel itself is the means by which Risley can de and reconstruct this past, finally facing these events with the arrival of age.

Moreover, this, among other scenarios, ratifies the fact that "*Cat's Eye* is also about visibility, about who sees and who is seen, about evading or controlling the gaze, about the gaze that is the precondition and product of art." (HITE, 1995, p. 136). That is, whether in real

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Cold shoots through me. My overshoes are filling, and the shoes inside them; water drenches my snow pants. (...) I clutch the hat and look up at the bridge. Nobody is there. (...) I try to move my feet. They're very heavy, because of the water inside my boots. (...) If I don't move soon I will be frozen in the creek." (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 2914-2948)

<sup>10</sup> Caruth (1996), when exposing the nature of trauma, also comments that this event — which can be also called a dissociative break in time — can cause victims to find it hard to “locate” its meaning, while at the same time it creates a kind of absence that itself points to the event. Comparing this definition to what happens in *Cat's Eye*, it takes decades for Risley to finally be able to confront her difficult memories, even though she expresses her traumatic childhood through many of her paintings.

<sup>11</sup> O'Flinn (2011), when analyzing the work of Edward Adamson, known as the father of art-therapy in Britain, asserts that even the presence of an artist would facilitate self-expression among people who suffered from mental health issues. Moreover, the very act of expressing oneself through art was considered an act of healing, in the words of Adamson.

life or in her paintings, Risley is faced with a power dynamic that affects herself and all the women around her, as said, a dynamic based primarily on behavior and appearance.

Further than the repression Risley herself suffers from her peers, the women in *Cat's Eye* are also deeply concerned about their looks. This is presented very early in the narrative, when Risley comes across messages in girls' magazines, especially those that imply that they are being watched all the time; the speech of women around her, as a young adult, denouncing when women are “letting themselves go” also reinforces the ideas of femininity which are generally expected. The figure of the Watchbird, here, is of main importance: the character, always watching what kids are doing with its large eyes, is used to indirectly supervise them.



**Figure 1: Watchbird in the children’s dental health week magazine**

The picture above shows one of the watchbird representations in a children’s dental health week magazine, which was one of the possible ways through which Risley got to know the character. Analyzing this illustration, it is possible to see that the watchbird reinforces good behavior children were supposed to have, watching to see if they will act accordingly to the instructions or not, as represented in the first illustration, by the left. Next, the watchbird is on top of the sink in the illustration at the middle of the panel, surveilling the children to see if they will brush their teeth or not. By the way the child is avoiding the watchbird, who has an angry expression, it seems that this scene represents some misbehavior. In contrast, the next scene, in which the character is smiling, displays the rules indicated by the magazine. In this sense, there are three roles represented in the illustrations: the watchbird as the one who surveys — the first illustration, on the left; the watchbird as the one who reprehends children who do not behave well — the second illustration; and, finally, the watchbird who congratulates the children who behave well — the third illustration. Each of these scenarios also implies a different emotion from the watchbird: attention, anger, and happiness. Risley



comments especially on the first and second representations: while doing a scrapbook, the protagonist cuts and replaces these watchbirds alongside figures of women “not behaving well”.

Other pictures show women doing things they aren't supposed to do. Some of them gossip too much, some are sloppy, others bossy. Some of them knit too much. 'Walking, riding, standing, sitting. Where she goes, there goes her knitting,' says one. (...) Some of the women have a Watchbird beside them, a red and black bird like a child's drawing, with big eyes and stick feet. 'This is a Watchbird watching a Busybody', it says. 'This is a Watchbird watching YOU'. I see that there will be no end to imperfection, or to doing things the wrong way. Even if you grow up, no matter how hard you scrub, whatever you do, there will always be some other stain or spot on your face or stupid act, somebody frowning. (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 2219- 2228)

It is relevant to point out that Risley presents this viewpoint very early in the narrative, even before the persecution she was about to suffer. Thus, the character had already acknowledged the kind of perfection expected from women from the texts and pictures in these magazines. It is not surprising that Risley later becomes so interested in controlling how she is seen after experiencing being judged so intensely.

In summary, the novel sheds light on how others' perspectives can have a large influence in our self-perception, and how gaining control of this perspective — that is, of this way of looking or be looked at — is empowering<sup>12</sup>. Risley deals with her childhood trauma by taking control not only of her position as a *seer* — an artist — but also by translating these difficult events in her own symbols.

Following the considerations above, Risley's interest in becoming an artist also has a connection to her position as seer/seen. The artist is interested in controlling the gaze, and by assuming a position which is not normally expected from women, she is able to dissociate herself from being *seen*. This scenario has a few implications. When trying to distance herself from the position of *seen*, which, as previously mentioned, is usually occupied by women, Risley also reproduces part of the oppression she suffered. In the company of her fellow classmates, the protagonist remains silent as they speak disparagingly of the women in her

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<sup>12</sup> “The many origins and sources of inspiration of the notion of empowerment can be traced back to such varied domains as feminism, Freudian psychology, theology, the Black Power movement, and Gandhism (Simon 1994; Cornwall and Brock 2005). Empowerment refers to principles, such as the ability of individuals and groups to act in order to ensure their own well-being or their right to participate in decision-making that concerns them, that have guided research on and social intervention among poor and marginalized populations for several decades in the United States (Simon 1994)” (CALVÈS, 2009, p. 739).

course: “I think I can see them clearly because I don’t expect anything from them. In fact, I expect a lot. I hope to be accepted.” (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 4380).

Before starting the process of reconciliation with herself and her past, the Risley’s initial attitude is to participate, even that in a passive way, in this sexist perspective and to somehow betray the women around her, accepting these same derogatory comments which were directed to her during childhood — about other women’s appearances, behaviors, and thoughts —, in order to be accepted by men around her. According to Hite, “As a result of her experience as victim of this displaced oppression, Elaine turns away from the ghettoized lives of girls and women and toward the largely separate sphere of the masculine, which she apprehends as a relatively safe haven from female machinations” (HITE, 1995, p. 137).

This situation culminates when Susie, the previous girlfriend of Risley’s current boyfriend, Josef, becomes pregnant and almost dies while trying to abort. When Susie reaches Risley seeking help, the protagonist takes her to hospital, and later comments this episode with Josef.

I agree with him [Josef] that she’s been stupid. At the same time I know that in her place I would have been just as stupid. I would have done what she has done, moment by moment, step by step. Like her I would have panicked, like her I would not have told Josef, like her I would not have known where to go. 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*. (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 5001)

This line — *it serves her right* — is the same that Risley overhears Mrs. Smeath — the mother of Grace Smeath, one of the protagonist’s childhood persecutors — saying, when she discovers the torments Risley is suffering from her friends, including Grace herself. Regarding this, the protagonist sees Susie the same way she was seen by Mrs. Smeath years prior: she deserves being punished by not acting as she is supposed to, even though Risley admits that she would act the same way. This reaction sheds light on the trauma underneath the protagonist’s perception of the situation, as well as on how this event influences her self-image. In other words, Mrs. Smeath’s comment, imprinted in Risley’s mind at that moment, judged simultaneously Susie and Risley, since not only she would act the same way as Susie, but also had a great chance to commit the same mistake, being very close in age and experience to Susie.

In this sense, Risley's process of accepting herself and the women around her is a difficult one, which takes place mainly through her art. That is, the character employs her art in order to access these repressed feelings, or, in other words, her inner life, condensing through her visual symbols multiple psychological and aesthetic elements (VICKROY, 2005). This can be associated with the fact that

Many of Margaret Atwood's female characters similarly struggle to come to a definition of self, a self that is not dependent on men. In particular do they struggle to liberate themselves from the gaze of men, to avoid being used as their mirrors. It is therefore not surprising that vision and perception, the art of looking and the art of being seen, generally appear as themes in Margaret Atwood's writings. These themes are very often expressed through Atwood's complex use of eye and mirror imagery. Such is the case in *Cat's Eye*. Elaine's struggle for identity is inextricably connected to the visual (...) However, both vision and perception are at times distorted and turned upside down in order to give way to Elaine's unique imaginary eye. *Cat's Eye* is thus a novel that also deals with visions and distorted perception. (DE JONG, 1998, p. 98)

In conclusion, and exploring even further this theme, I add that Risley also seeks a definition of self that is not dependent not only on men, but also on her traumatic experiences and on gender roles, having in mind the influence of these elements in the protagonist's trajectory, as previously exposed. This self-representation and definition are achieved, as said, mainly through Risley's paintings, which play a crucial role in allowing the character to access and transform her experiences, distancing herself from this initial movement of reproducing the same oppressions she suffered as a child. As asserted by Vickroy, with this process, Risley can order and control many of her memories, achieving, at the end of the novel, along with her closure with Cordelia's ghost, a true healing.

## **2.2 Weaving Through Painting and Narrative**

According to Banerjee (1990), there are three narratives that intertwine in *Cat's Eye*: that of Risley as a mature woman — highlighting the typical irony of Atwood's works, personified in the middle-aged protagonist who cannot understand today's culture; that of Risley as a child — strangely, an unaddressed voice that narrates events not from an emotional point of view but from an objective one; and, finally, a third voice, belonging to paintings and dreams. In this way, we have three different points of view, which trigger the construction of what Banerjee calls a “narrative braid”. These voices intersperse throughout the narrative, however, as the narrative draws to a closing, the voices of Risley as a mature

woman and Risley as a young woman come closer and closer. The unmarked voice, belonging to the child who experiences trauma but does not express it explicitly, is echoed in the adult who seeks her own therapy from the scenes and objects that are painted, also without ever directly addressing the traumatic events, but, instead, presenting them through this child's voice. This dynamic ends at the end of the book, as above described, when Risley encounters the ghost of her former friend moments before she leaves Toronto, near the bridge where Cordelia had abandoned her to freeze to death.

This complex intertwining of perspectives gains a new dimension when we think of how painting and narrative are a part of this process. Regarding this, as previously mentioned, all of *Cat's Eye's* chapters, apart from the first, second, tenth, and last, have the same name as paintings by Risley. These chapters present the events that inspired the paintings indicated in the title, as well as an introduction that takes place in the present of the narrative, when Risley is already a middle-aged person. Furthermore, the paintings that name the chapters are those present in the protagonist's retrospective exhibition.

In this scenario, there is a correspondence between the paintings and the time in which they were originated and/or painted, that is, the time of the narrative. At the beginning of the book, Risley comments on how time is a series of liquid transparencies (ATWOOD, 2009); in her exposition, at the end of the narrative, she comments that she is surrounded by the time she has built (ATWOOD, 2009). In other words, the character considers how her works are ways to express the time of her life, in the same manner of "liquid transparencies", that is, as multiple layers which complement each other.

It is also interesting to mention that Risley's brother, coincidentally named Stephen, is a renowned physicist, and as a teenager he comments on time not being a line but a dimension, and about the possibility of time travel; finally, there is a quote by Stephen Hawking right at the opening of the book, which questions why we remember the past, not the future<sup>13</sup>. In summary, these considerations on the nature of time seem to direct the reader's attention to the fact that both the autobiographical account, which retakes these key moments, and the artist's paintings are ways of travelling through these events — that is, travelling through time.

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13 Stephen Hawking comments on the nature of time, among other topics, in his books *The Universe in a Nutshell* and *A Brief History of Time*. The theme is much addressed in *Cat's Eye*, which brings several references to physics and to Hawking's own figure, through Risley's brother.

Thus, the naming of the novel's chapters after the paintings produced by the protagonist indicates that the autobiographical account can also be organized from the paintings, so that these represent some of the main events in Risley's life. Like the narrator's account, they are also in chronological order, with regard to what they represent. As stated by Ingersoll, Risley's retrospective exhibition is an event that allows her to reinforce her own identity and history. In this way, completing the retrospective exposition and "giving birth to herself" (INGERSOLL, 1991), Risley manages to differentiate herself from other women in her life and to deal with her traumas, taking charge of her narrative.

Dvorák (2001) comments on the alternation between the verbal and the visual within the narrative, highlighting the conjunctive interaction between the two means. In view of this, the fictional painting would work, for Atwood, as a way of translating the "real" into text (DVORÁK, 2001). In this sense, at times readers must read the text as if they were seeing the paintings, which dissolves the boundaries between the two media.

Finally, also according to Dvorák, it is important to emphasize how the narrative is as relevant to the "reading" of the screens, as the screens are relevant to the reading of the narrative. In conclusion, the union of the two media draws attention to the very artistic act of representing reality, that is, one of the main themes of the novel.

[...] the elements of exposition in the prose enable the viewer to see behind and beneath the canvas, and to arrive at a more complete view than if we saw the canvas alone. The writing elaborates on and expands on the vision of the painting, and the painting synthesizes the mixture of sensations created by the writing. [...] By writing on painting, by joining image and acoustic image, Atwood self-reflexively insists on the sign's lack of co-naturalness, on the dis-semblance of words and the things they name. Her trembling canvasses call attention to the multiplicity of things to be grasped by language, and to the polysemy of signs, which can never suffice to entirely apprehend reality, but which liberate the imagination and allow the artist, to borrow Foucault's terms, to make everything speak. Both the narrator's canvasses and the author's novel are hymns to perception and vision, to the artist's powers of transformation and control. (DVORÁK, 2001, p. 9)

### **2.3 Vision and Visions: The Use of Mirrors**

Finally, the last aspect to be considered in the novel's discussion on perspective is the use of mirrors. To begin with, it is relevant to point out how mirrors are not of importance only to the novel's plot, but also to its own title: *Cat's Eye* refers to Risley's favorite marble,

and to cats' field of vision<sup>14</sup>, both convex surfaces. In this sense, convex mirrors<sup>15</sup> are broadly employed in the novel. De Jong (1998) considers there are two types of mirrors in *Cat's Eye*, each one with its own metaphorical implications:

On closer examination, the mirrors in *Cat's Eye* can be divided into two kinds: flat and convex, each with different reflecting properties, each a symbol of a different kind of perception. Flat mirrors have an entrapping quality: looking into these mirrors, Elaine feels trapped, framed, two-dimensional and split in half. (...) Convex mirrors, on the other hand, open up further dimensions. They not only repeat or reflect their sources, they also distort them at the same time. During her second year at university, studying art history, Elaine becomes fascinated by the effects of glass and other light-reflecting surfaces. It is then that she comes across the very famous painting of Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Marriage*, painted in 1434. (DE JONG, 1998, p. 101)

*The Arnolfini Marriage*, as mentioned by De Jong, fascinates Risley, and also represents one of her main inspirations while painting two of her major works, as I will further comment on. Jan van Eyck's work features a convex mirror between the couple portrayed, which is considered one of the central features in this painting, although the mirror itself does not occupy much of the scenario.



**Figure 2: *The Arnolfini Marriage*, by Jan van Eyck**

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<sup>14</sup> “Cats have a wider field of view — about 200 degrees, compared with humans' 180-degree view. Cats also have a greater range of peripheral vision, all the better to spot that mouse (or toy) wriggling in the corner” (GHOSE, 2013, n. pag.). Cats' eyes, as I will further explore, are also convex, as well as other types of eyes, which has a direct connection to how *Cat's Eye* deals with mirrors and vision.

<sup>15</sup> Convex mirrors are known for diminishing the proportions of reflected images, causing the field of view to become bigger.

The convex mirror between the couple reflects the painter's image, who is portrayed painting the scene. This innovative aspect of the painting, according to De Jong,

(...) leads to the second important aspect of the painting: the fact that the painter makes himself known and present to the viewer in two ways. Unlike medieval paintings when artists were seen as instruments of God and paintings never took the observer's viewpoint into account, Renaissance painters started to view themselves as individual artists who demanded to be known by the viewer. But van Eyck signed the painting not only as an artist, he signed it as an eyewitness, an observer of the event. Apart from the signature, he found another way of commemorating his presence. (DE JONG, 1998, p. 102).

The significance and presence of this convex mirror in Van Eyck's painting relates to how mirrors are seen in the novel, as already exposed by De Jong, as well as influences two of Risley's main paintings: *Cat's Eye*, homonym to the novel's title, and *Unified Field Theory*. In this regard, both paintings represent crucial moments in the protagonist's life, and also reinforce how the use of these convex mirrors helps Risley to expand her vision, making it possible for the artist to apprehend and transform the difficult situations which underline these works.

Following the considerations on how mirrors are employed in the novel,

The mirror imagery in *Cat's Eye*, then, serves to underline Elaine's process of identification. However, where flat mirrors only frustrate Elaine's attempt at perceiving herself, the convex mirrors help her to come to a more satisfying definition of self. Due to their distorting properties and their roundedness, they disrupt the concepts of a linear development in the formation of the female self. They undermine the concepts of a consistent, coherent and unchanging subjectivity. They undercut closed systems of symmetry and opposition, twins and mirror images, Self and Other. Instead, they open up space and time, they acknowledge difference and otherness, they legitimize artistic vision and unconventional perception. They show Elaine a rounded self that is "slightly askew", as if in a different arrangement of space and time. In short, they symbolize Elaine Risley's complex, multiple and inconsistent female identity as a middle-aged woman artist. (DE JONG, 1998, p. 106).

Regarding De Jong's comments, it is possible to make a contrast between how the two types of mirrors work and how they relate to previous mentioned issues on self-perception/representation, identity, and perspective. With the two paintings by Risley mentioned above, the character closes her retrospective exhibition, providing a significant and condensed perspective on her life trajectory. To begin with, *Cat's Eye's* description is:

The fourth painting is called *Cat's Eye*. It's a self-portrait, of sorts. My head is in the right foreground, though it's shown only from the middle of the nose up: just the upper half of the nose, the eyes looking outwards, the forehead and the topping of hair. I've put in the incipient wrinkles, the little chicken-feet at the corners of the lids. A few grey hairs. This is cheating, as in reality I pull them out.

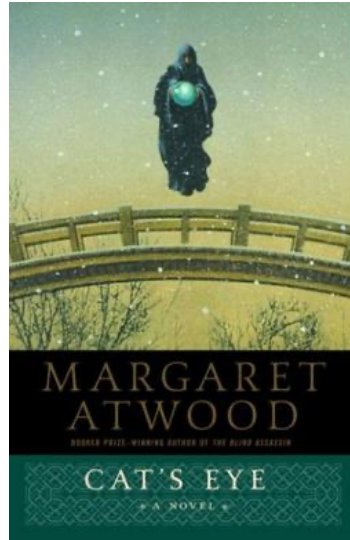
Behind my half-head, in the centre of the picture, in the empty sky, a pier-glass in hanging, convex and encircled by an ornate frame. In it, a section of the back of my head is visible; but the hair is different, younger.

At a distance, and condensed by the curved space of the mirror, there are three small figures, dressed in the winter clothing of the girls of forty years ago. They walk forward, their faces shadowed, against a field of snow. (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 6348-6352)

Considering the previous comments on the traumatic experiences Risley suffered as a child, the connection between these events and the *Cat's Eye* painting is undeniable. In this regard, I see that the work reflects the same movement the protagonist is doing while making her autobiographical account, that is, the character is reviewing as a middle-aged person the difficult events that happened during childhood. It is also interesting to point out that the means which connect present and past is the pier glass, confirming De Jong's assertions on how convex mirrors can open further dimensions, at the same distorting their sources. Associating this statement with the painting, the time travel represented in the work, at the same time opening a further dimension and distorting its source — that is, opening and distorting the limits between past and present, or, in the point of view of Risley as a child, present and future — seems to fit in this role, represented through the pier glass at the center of the piece.

Following, there is *Unified Field Theory*, the painting which closes the exposition. This painting is chosen to illustrate the book cover in some editions of *Cat's Eye*, such as Virago Press's 1990 edition, Seal Books' 1999 edition, and Bloomsbury's 2007 edition. The illustration below was originally from McClelland & Stewart's 1988 edition, but was also used in Anchor's 1998 edition and Doubleday Book's 1989 edition, among other editions and translations of the book.





**Figure 3: *Cat's Eye's* book cover, representing the painting *Unified Field Theory***

The picture above contains some of Risley's main elements in painting, such as the bridge, the figure in a black cloak, and the cat's eye marble. As I will further explore, these symbols not only have a meaning individually, but also condense many of the themes explored by the novel, as well as the protagonist's trajectory.

The last painting is *Unified Field Theory*. It's a vertical oblong, larger than the other paintings. Cutting across it a little over a third up is a wooden bridge. To either side of the bridge are the tops of trees, bare of leaves, with a covering of snow on them, as after a heavy moist snowfall. This snow is also on the railing and struts of the bridge.

Positioned above the top railing of the bridge, but so her feet are not quite touching it, is a woman dressed in black, with a black hood or veil covering her hair. Here and there on the black of her dress or cloak there are pinpoints of light. The sky behind her is the sky after sunset; at the top of it is the lower half of the moon. Her face is partly in shadow.

She is the Virgin of Lost Things. Between her hands, at the level of her heart, she holds a glass object: an oversized cat's-eye marble, with a blue centre.

Underneath the bridge is the night sky, as seen through a telescope. Star upon star, red, blue, yellow and white, swirling nebulae, galaxy upon galaxy: the universe, in its incandescence and darkness. Or so you think. But there are also stones down there, beetles and small roots, because this is the underside of the ground.

At the lower edge of the painting the darkness pales and merges to a lighter tone, the clear blue of water, because the creek flows there, underneath the earth, underneath the bridge, down from the cemetery. The land of the dead people. (ATWOOD, 2009, Loc. 6352-6366).

There are two elements which deserve further comment in this painting. First, there is the figure of the Virgin of Lost Things. This figure is based on Our Lady of Perpetual Help, of whom Risley sees a picture of in the catholic church she frequented as a child. She is later transformed into the Virgin of Lost Things, and has a main role in the near death experience the protagonist has at the ravine.

This fantasy figure emerges in Elaine's imagination in time to guide her out of the ravine's freezing water. She embodies Elaine's own act of self-preservation and reflects Elaine's desire that a mother figure, or her own mother, save her, because the mysterious figure disappears as soon as her mother rushes to help her (VICKROY, 2005, p. 138).

Regarding this, while almost freezing in the ravine, Risley sees the Virgin of Lost Things, who carries her to home. Later, Risley finds out that who rescued her was her own mother. Nevertheless, this figure keeps being a source of inspiration to that artist, who portrays it in other paintings.

The second significant element in the painting is the creek. Risley ends the painting description mentioning that below the bridge, there is a creek that comes from down the cemetery, the land of the dead people. During the narrative, Risley and her friends believe that the creek is cursed, exactly because the water that flows in it comes from the cemetery. The girls create stories in which the water that streams is from the dissolved bodies from the cemetery, and that whoever touches it will become a zombie. Risley knows that these stories are not true, because her mother usually walks through the bridge and the creek. However, the protagonist also remembers these stories while almost freezing below the bridge, thinking she would become part of the land of the dead people.

De Jong (1998) provides some interesting highlights on the significance of this work. According to the scholar, in view of the painting's title, the canvas appears to be an attempt by Risley to present her life as a whole which is composed of opposing entities: the past (marble) and the present (the Virgin of Lost Things); vision (the scenario presented) and visions (the vision obtained by the marble, a convex mirror); science (the universe) and art (the composition), the universal and the particular, among other aspects. Also considering the two elements mentioned above, the Virgin of Lost Things represents religion, but also has a private meaning to the artist, since she is not the same figure as Our Lady of Perpetual Help, but the one created by Risley, and the one who rescued her in the ravine; the contrast between the universe and the creek can represent, as commented by De Jong, the contrast between the universal and the particular, that is, the universe sky and the creek from Risley's childhood, with its own folklore and personal significance.

In conclusion, *Cat's Eye's* ample use of mirrors reflects how perspective is one of the main subjects in the novel. In this sense, the use of convex mirrors broadens the

protagonist's vision, both metaphorically and literally. This is complemented by the fact that Risley employs convex mirrors in two of her main works, which represent key events in the character's life. Both the pier glass mirror, in *Cat's Eye*, and the cat's eye, in *Unified Field Theory*, open new dimensions, in which Risley can travel through time and space in order to elaborate these difficult portraits. The fact that *Unified Field Theory* is used as inspiration to many of the novel's covers also ratify the fact that the movement made by Risley through the narrative is very similar to what is represented in this painting, which condenses a range of elements and approaches the change of view caused by the marble, a convex mirror.

## CONCLUSION

In my view, *Cat's Eye* is one of the most complex Atwood novels. This is because, as stated by Banerjee (1990) at the beginning of this monograph, the novel has more than one face, and tells more than one story. In this regard, although I divided this reading in two sections, in which I focused on, respectively, authorship and perspective, many of the issues brought in each one of these sections is related to the other. In this sense, while reading and studying the novel, I realized that everything was connected in some way: many authorship issues also underline perspective issues, and perspective issues underline a way of viewing the artist and art, which are related to authorship.

My objective with this monograph was to understand how these two themes — authorship and perspective — are presented and discussed in the *Cat's Eye*, considering some of the main events presented in the novel, and the main critical support on it, as well as on Atwood's works. In this sense, I explored the meanings and connections of the events presented in the novel, relating my research not only to the fictional world portrayed in it, but also the many links it has to Atwood's body of work, and other works of art.

Regarding authorship issues, I see that *Cat's Eye* elevates the discussion on the roles of reader/seer and the artist, mainly by, as stated by Cooke (1992), not allowing the reader to master the text. At first glance, this seems like a very uncomfortable position to be in, that is, that of a reader who cannot differentiate between what is real — in the sense of being based on facts from Atwood's own life — and what is not. However, it is this same difficult position that highlights one of the most important and complex movements of the novel: the artist's intention is private and should not be devaluated when contrasted with the public's interpretation, and vice-versa. Considering Atwood's own scenario with this, it is clear to me that this is purposely made as an answer to the many biographical approaches to her work. Risley's ironical responses to the comments on her works around her shed light to the fact that this situation is equally uncomfortable for the other side, that is, the one of the artists, since not being able to tell what a work means is also difficult, and the novel does not erase this discomfort.

The autobiographical lure, here, complements this discussion. As mentioned above, *Cat's Eye's* readers are fed with a significant number of similarities between Risley and Atwood, with the main difference being that the first is a painter, and the second a writer. In

my view, it is important to highlight that, as brought by me in the first chapter, none of the approaches — biographical or not — should be considered more valid than the other. Applying this to the novel, with Atwood's own writings as evidence that *Cat's Eye* has, indeed, autobiographical aspects, this should not mean that the novel should be read completely as autobiographical or not. I find Cooke's (1992) definition of *Cat's Eye* as a fictive biography very suitable for this work, since the novel can be read as *both* fiction and autobiography, as suggested by the scholar. In the limbo in which readers find themselves concerning *Cat's Eye* referentiality, the most important is not to focus on *what* is autobiographical in the novel, but on *how* autobiography is employed in order to enrich the narrative.

Regarding perspective issues, *Cat's Eye* provides a complete and intricate comment on women's socialization, while it explores how this socialization can be resignified through various means, being Risley's the one of art. Atwood's choice of presenting how girls are socialized in a very violent manner through the lenses of a girl who is oppressed by other girls is very bold. On this account, instead of being harassed by the men in the ravine, whom Risley fears greatly, the harassment comes from her friends. This context is much different from what is usually presented in this type of discussion, in the sense it shows how girls and women can reproduce and maintain gender roles that are imposed on them, on the other way around. This focus presented in the novel exposes how this situation leaves its victims without reaction, since they are faced with a type of oppression which usually comes from other sources.

Risley finds a way out of her traumatic experiences by imprinting her own feelings and perspectives through painting. In this regard, not only the use of art is shown as therapeutic, but also as a form of empowerment. The protagonist's interest in becoming an artist, then, is justified by the fact that she wants to dissociate herself from the position of *seen*, instead, wishing to become *seer*. However, as exposed in this monograph, Risley also is faced with challenges along this path through healing, which is only complete at the end of the novel. As commented earlier, the fact that Risley manages to find closure does not necessarily mean that this closure is a happy one: in order to fully forgive and accept her childhood traumas, the protagonist also must ratify the fact that she and Cordelia were never able to reconcile.

Among these perspective issues, the connection between painting and writing also

plays a main role. Regarding this, the “narrative braid” (BANERJEE, 1990) of the novel gains one more dimension when we consider how Risley’s paintings are also a form of storytelling. Hence, the two means should not be viewed separately and/or in detriment of one another, since the novel’s own structure endorses the fact that both the paintings and the chapters are intrinsically intertwined. In this sense, *Cat’s Eye* deals directly with how self-representation and self-definition are achieved through various means.

Finally, the use of mirrors enhances the novel’s discussion on the many perspectives. Convex mirrors, here, represent a way of opening new dimensions and distorting the present ones, making it possible for Risley to see beyond her traumatic experiences. Not only the great influence of Jan van Eyck’s work, but also the protagonist’s appropriation of perspective using convex mirrors in her paintings show how a change in a literal field of view can also represent a change in a metaphorical field of view. In this sense, both *Cat’s Eye* and *Unified Field Theory* close the retrospective exhibition and represent the main movement made by the novel, that is, one of reviewing and signifying Risley’s experience as a woman, and as an artist.

Deciding to analyze such a challenging novel provided a considerable amount of work, however, it also brought many interesting insights inside and outside the novel. *Cat’s Eye*, by dealing with many delicate and relevant topics, brings a captivating account, and, especially, a very truthful one. As well as its interesting structure and presentation, the fact that the novel approaches and exposes these subjects in such an honest way is what makes readers so compelled by it. Risley’s journey represents a journey through time, through art, through being a woman, and, especially, through being an artist. Even though both Risley and her paintings do not exist in real life, as far as we know, we, as readers, are touched by them, both made skillfully available to us through the narrative. To conclude, in my view, *Cat’s Eye* is a narrative in the form a painting, and a painting in the form of a narrative.

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