

## ENGLISH: *CAT'S EYE*

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Cat's Eye begins with Stephen W. Hawking's question in A Brief History of Time: "Why do we remember the past, and not the future?" Therefore, it is unsurprising that the novel is imbued with imagery that endeavours to explore this central idea of the relationship between time, memories and character. In Cat's Eye, Margaret Atwood explores the psychological growth of Elaine, as Elaine travels through the bullying during childhood and the betrayal of men during adulthood. While the novel broadens to explore as the relationship between victim and bully, the ideas and concerns of femaleness are also prevalent in the novel.

The recurrent use of sensory imagery aids the readers to understand Elaine's thoughts and also picture what is happening in our own minds. The imagery of the "dim and cold and damp" hole relates to the visual and tactile senses. It creates an atmosphere of helplessness in which human comfort and warmth are denied, therefore drawing attention to the extent to which the bullying took place. She describes colours vividly, such as when she imagines "pastel icing" and "pink candles burning" in a "pale" light. Pastel colours are calm, gentle and non-threatening, therefore the description of these neutral colours highlights Elaine's passiveness. Conversely, through keen descriptions of clothing, Margaret Atwood shows us the various personalities and emotional states of the characters. In passage three, Elaine paints an unflattering picture of Cordelia. She is wearing a "grey snowsuit jacket", has "green wool kneesocks sloppily down her ankles", and "brown school brogues scuffed at the toes". The use of dull colours suggests a lack of self-confidence and self-worth. This is a stark contrast to the "cerise" jogging suit that Elaine wears towards the end of the novel. Cerise is a vivid pink hue, and implies confidence. At the start of the novel, Elaine wears a "powder blue" suit, which suggests passiveness. However, now that she has overcome the bullying, Elaine has developed the courage and the ability to stand up for herself. Therefore, her emotional states are indicated through the choice of the colour of her clothes. Nevertheless, Elaine still continues to wear black dresses. The colour black is associated with self-denial. The reader realises that Elaine does not feel completely secure in her environment; she feels intimidated by the people who have come to view the art gallery, thus she instinctively wears black in order to maintain her anonymity. The physical experiences, such as seeing, smelling and touching all help to enlighten her.

The idea of forgiveness is prevalent throughout the novel. At the end of the novel, Elaine is finally able to forgive Cordelia for bullying her. Forgiving Cordelia is an extremely important part of her formation as a person. At the very moment that Elaine forgives Cordelia, "the snow in (her) eyes withdraws like smoke". Snow is a translucent substance; therefore, this vivid visual imagery implies that before that, Elaine was unable to see clearly. She had recovered some of her memories in Toronto, although she could not "remember what (she) really felt". Only at this moment, when her blindness evaporates, is she led to an enlightenment of all her past memories, thus resulting in her understanding of her emotions and the reasons as to why she had feelings of "shame", "awkwardness", "weakness", "loneliness" and "fear". By forgiving Cordelia, Elaine feels release, as she realises that those feelings were "always" Cordelia's, and not her own. Forgiveness was a way of gaining power over Cordelia; only through forgiving was she able to conquer the Cordelia inside of her and let her go. Therefore, she is now free of all emotional attachments to Cordelia, and is able to develop her own emotions. Her words of comfort, "it's okay, you can go home now", is a repetition of the words used by the Virgin Mary when she was hallucinating when suffering from hypothermia in the ravine. Elaine's urge for Cordelia to "go home" implies that Cordelia, just like herself, is a displaced person, and broadens this category beyond the narrow one constructed around Mr Banjeri and Mrs. Finestein. By repeating what the Virgin Mary has said, Mary also becomes a symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation, not only with Cordelia but also with herself.

The Virgin Mary also has several other connotations within the novel. The Virgin Mary represents motherhood and support. Elaine describes her mother as "not like the other mothers"; she was passive and "powerless". When Elaine was bullied, her mother told her to "learn to stand up" for her

own self and to have “more backbone”. Therefore, Elaine felt that what was happening to her was her “own fault, for not having more backbone.” Since her mother does not stand up to the, Elaine wishes for her mother to be like Mary. In contrast, the Virgin Mary evokes a sense of “warmth and painlessness” in Elaine. She gives Elaine the power to be strong and independent from Cordelia, which is most evident at the ravine, when the Virgin Mary told Elaine, “It’s okay, you can go home now.” This leads the reader to comprehend that the Virgin Mary is a manifestation of Elaine’s own power to be free. This can be further seen when Elaine’s decision to pray to the Virgin Mary originated as an act of rebellion towards Mrs. Smeath. The Virgin Mary enables Elaine to feel a sense of control towards her own life.

It is therefore not surprising that she paints Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Instead of being presented as a positive, illuminating, and compassionate figure, the Virgin Mary is instead painted with the “head of a lioness”, and is “fierce”, “alert to danger” and “wild”. This is illustrative of Elaine’s desire to acquire power. In the painting, the Virgin Mary descends to Earth, “which is covered with snow and slush”. Snow and slush are things that were present in her childhood; therefore, it is apparent to the reader that many of her paintings incorporate repressed memories from childhood, although she does not realise that her paintings embody them. Since Elaine is a painter, she paints many pictures in the novel. The frequent imagery of paintings invites the reader to think and feel through Elaine’s subconscious mind. In Elaine’s painting of Cordelia, Half a Face, Elaine paints Cordelia so that her eyes made her look “tentative” and “frightened”. These contrasted with her usual “defiant” and “almost belligerent” stare. This demonstrates that the paintings come from a part of Elaine that cannot be controlled. Elaine intentionally paints Cordelia’s apprehension rather than her aggression, as she wants to paint her differently. Also, although the title of the painting is Half a Face, Cordelia’s “entire face is visible”. Another face, “covered with white cloth”, is painted behind her. This may be Elaine’s own face; it is painted to reveal the close relationship between bully and victim. When the bullying started, Elaine merges into Cordelia, and they become this one person. The lines between victims and oppressors blur. The covered face is described by Elaine to be “hanging like heads of animals”, thus introducing the imagery of being headless, which relates back to the time when she was still eight years’ old and pretending to be the headless “Mary Queen of Scots”. The imagery of headlessness is relevant as it symbolises powerlessness. Cordelia is able to control Elaine’s thoughts; therefore, all of Elaine’s thoughts are Cordelia’s. The cat’s eye, which sees what is happening and absorbs all the memories, is in her own head. Hence, when Elaine loses her own head, she loses her cat’s eye, as well as her memories and her own identity that are found in it. When she attempts to find who she is, she can only find out who she is through Cordelia. At the end of the novel, when she finds her cat’s eye, she regains all her repressed memories and emotions, since the cat’s eye is repository of her emotions. She has her own identity and sees Cordelia’s emotions as separate ideas, but still acknowledges that they are connected. She hence understands that the pressure to be powerless and frightened is gone, and grows emotionally stronger that she is even able to forgive Cordelia.

The use of a first person’s narrative voice enables the reader to feel that Elaine is very present throughout the novel. In *Cat’s Eye*, Elaine moves through suppressed memories, recovered memories, and the subconscious mind. The story is filtered through Elaine’s consciousness, thus readers are constantly finding out her emotions through the description of her feelings. When Elaine was “put into the hole” by Cordelia, Grace and Carol, Elaine expresses that she felt “sadness” and “a sense of betrayal”. She felt betrayed as she had initially thought that the act of burial was merely part of a roleplaying game, but came to the realisation that they were doing this to harm her physically. However, she was still unable to understand why they wanted to harm her. While Elaine is infused with powerful feelings that she does not understand, the readers recognize the inequality of the friendship. As a narrator, Elaine slides forwards and backwards in time. At the beginning of the first chapter, Elaine is narrating in the present state, but then lapses back into the past. This is evident in the passages- in passage 1, Elaine is speaking as a child who is being bullied, while in passage 3, she is an adult who has forgiven Cordelia. Therefore, Elaine is present as a narrator, as a child, and an adult in Toronto. The present and Toronto are closely related, as it is in Toronto that Elaine recovers her memories and forgives Cordelia, therefore being able to overcome the

emotional attachments from her past and become her current self. It is interesting, however, that she uses the present tense throughout the novel. The intentional use of present tense highlights the fact that the past and present are all connected. Elaine is formed by her past experiences and the people she has met in her life. The reader is thus able to discern that it does not matter how we may change in our adult lives; it is our past which defines us.

The optimistic ending of *Cat's Eye*, with the forgiveness of Cordelia, leaves the readers with a feeling of positivity. Elaine's acknowledgement that Cordelia will always be a part of her proves that "nothing goes away", as time is a multi-dimensional shape which exists only in our minds. Since we are defined by the past, including who has wronged or betrayed us, the novel ends with a wise message: "an eye for an eye only leads to more blindness", hence pointing out to the readers that that to achieve inner freedom, one must learn to forgive.