Sinister Spaces:
Liminality and the Southern Ontario Gothic in Margaret Atwood’s Fiction

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Cara Diane Bartz-Edge, candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in English, has presented a thesis titled, *Sinister Spaces: Liminality and the Southern Ontario Gothic in Margaret Atwood’s Fiction*, in an oral examination held on March 16, 2012. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood’s works are undoubtedly influenced by her academic training in Gothic and Victorian fiction. However, she also incorporates the influences of Southern Ontario – her backyard – and its regional subgenre of Southern Ontario Gothic. While traditional Gothic certainly incorporates binaries, Michael Hurley, the scholar at the forefront of the discussion of this unique subgenre, suggests that characters within this subgenre are entrapped in the liminal spaces created not simply by the meeting of seeming opposites, but at the points where their boundaries are blurred. Atwood’s fiction represents these liminal spaces; however, she provides options for a hopeful ending by providing her characters a means to escape their entrapment. Her characters must attempt to navigate the artificial representations of wilderness by society, examine the fluid boundary between life and death as morts-vivants, and attempt to resolve the separation of their identities into self and other by confessing the ghosts of their pasts. These spaces may appear to be terrifying and confusing due to these seeming opposites, but by accepting both sides, rather than trying to extricate one from the other, Atwood’s characters have the opportunity to learn about themselves and at once, calm the fear of the region.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used parenthetically throughout this thesis to identify frequently cited works by Margaret Atwood.

AG  Alias Grace
BA  The Blind Assassin
CE  Cat’s Eye
“DL” “Death by Landscape”
LO  Lady Oracle
“TT” “True Trash”
“WT” “Wilderness Tips”
Introduction

Margaret Atwood has long played with the genre of Gothic fiction. Her interest is most evident in *Lady Oracle* (1976) in which she parodies Costume Gothics, but Gothic themes and strategies run through many of her novels and short stories. While she is certainly familiar with the traditional trappings of the genre – medieval castles in faraway lands, villains terrorizing innocent maidens and ghostly apparitions with messages from beyond the grave – Atwood embraces the regional Gothic model which allows her to place the terror in her own backyard. Atwood's interest in Southern Ontario Gothic stems from her desire to examine the boundaries between binaries, such as civilization and wilderness, self and other, or life and death, and to deny their mutual exclusivity. Atwood domesticates the Gothic by exploiting the innate contradictions of life in the Southern Ontario region and, through these contradictions, evoking the conventional terror traditionally associated with liminal states (living death, for example). In the traditional Gothic novel, the aim of blurring these conceptual boundaries is largely to raise the anxiety of the reader. In Atwood’s handling of liminality, on the other hand, the unease that the author stimulates by confusing the wild and the civilized, the self and the other, the living and the dead, forms part of a rational critique of life in Southern Ontario.

Atwood’s fictional works – *Lady Oracle, Cat’s Eye* (1988), *Alias Grace* (1999) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000), as well as various short stories – all demonstrate points of liminality. Undoubtedly, the tropes of civilization and wilderness, self and other, and life and death have been examined in Atwood criticism, but not within the scope of Southern Ontario Gothic. Michael Hurley, in his definition of Southern Ontario Gothic, highlights
the importance of these liminal spaces and states. While the traditional Gothic focuses on the terror inspired by these metaphoric locations which can be excised by re-instating the border between the intersecting binaries, in Southern Ontario Gothic, Hurley suggests the border cannot be enforced. Instead, he suggests that these intersections provide “[a] sense of entrapment in an antiquated, decaying social order” (*Borders of Nightmare* 161). Atwood’s characters certainly embody this entrapment. However, rather than resigning these figures to a fate of entrapment, Atwood brings a thread of optimism to the regional subgenre, suggesting that these liminal spaces can be sources of productivity. Atwood’s work, then, makes a key contribution towards the ever-evolving critical definition of Southern Ontario Gothic. Rather than articulating this subgenre, which would involve the examination of a range of authors and works, this single-author study aims to show that Atwood co-opts the traditional anxieties and terrors of the Gothic and demonstrates that, while liminal conditions may *appear* to entrap her protagonists, these spaces are replete with opportunity for personal development which can calm the Gothic terror.

Examples of Atwood’s familiarity with and willingness to adapt the rules of the traditional Gothic are abundant throughout many of her works. However, as a means of entry into Atwood’s Gothic leanings, I will highlight how Atwood uses setting and the supernatural as two means of uncovering and subverting binaries. Atwood modifies the traditional Gothic spaces in order to call into question the assumed gender roles of its inhabitants. In “My Last Duchess,” from the short story cycle *Moral Disorder* (2006), Atwood reworks the tradition of villainous males and innocent maidens as her protagonist ponders the meaning of the Gothic poem of the same name by Robert Browning. Fred
Botting notes, “The major locus of Gothic plots, the castle, was gloomily predominant in early Gothic fiction. Decaying, bleak and full of hidden passageways, the castle was linked to other medieval edifices—abbeys, churches and graveyards especially—that, in their generally ruinous states, harked back to a feudal past associated with barbarity, superstition and fear” (2-3). In traditional Gothic, especially at its inception, the castle in a foreign land was an integral source of terror, making its inclusion a convention for the genre. Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), generally accepted as the first Gothic novel, makes great use of this setting. Princess Isabella escapes from the overbearing Manfred by trespassing through the castle’s caverns, passageways and trapdoors. Similarly, in Browning’s poem, after revealing his questionable past to the Count’s envoy while perusing the art collection in, presumably, his castle, Ferrera suggests that they “meet / [t]he company below” (l. 47-8). Atwood does not follow this rule of medieval castle settings in the full sense; rather, she follows the spirit of it, allowing it to become a more fluid convention. She places her female protagonist in a more contemporary and local setting, retaining the descent into the depths. Her protagonist has taken shelter in her parents’ cellar, secretly entering by “[slipping] through the back door and [creeping] down the cellar stairs, unseen” (83) or by “[sliding] into the house through the milk cupboard” (92). While in Walpole’s work, Isabella must cross these sinister paths in order to gain her freedom from the evil villain, Atwood resists the traditional “victimized woman” trope, instead making her female protagonist, the dominant and domineering partner in a relationship, perform actions that recall those of a tyrannous villain, entering a dark lair to further an evil plot. As a result, she becomes
more akin to Walpole’s Gothic villain, Manfred, who seeks to legitimize his claim to a stolen title. Both Manfred and Atwood’s protagonist pace their respective lairs and they formulate their villainous plans (Walpole 79, Atwood 83).

Atwood also draws similarities between her protagonist and Browning’s Duke of Ferrara, as both seem to dispose suspiciously of unsuitable partners (Browning l. 1, Atwood 76). Atwood’s protagonist attempts to force her philosophies on her boyfriend Bill, insisting he adopt her view of the poem. While she claims that “that people marking the exam were not going to be interested in Bill’s personal opinion” (89), Bill’s views align with the accepted understanding of the poem, that the Duke’s actions and speech are sinister. The protagonist notes, “for the purposes of the final exam, he had to be the villain” (84). By rejecting Bill’s view, the protagonist hopes to gain sympathy for the Duke, and thus for herself, to justify her series of “replacements” when her relationships had run their course. While the protagonist may appear to be a generous girlfriend for aiding her boyfriend, there are sinister motives lurking beneath the surface. While Manfred’s disruption of the lines of rightful inheritance and the Duke of Ferrara’s murderous tendencies place them more obviously in the role of insidious villain, Atwood highlights the Gothic threat of domination by persuasion. By subverting the gender stereotypes typically found in the Gothic convention, Atwood is interrogating the binary of gender, revealing that it is ultimately a social construction. There is no reason for the villain character to be male. Instead, Atwood suggests that gender is unrelated to the hierarchy of villain and victim.
Perhaps one of the most obvious conventions of Gothic fiction is the presence of ghosts and ghouls. While typically ghosts and goblins are more frightening than their binary counterpart, the human, Atwood questions this hierarchy of supposed opposites. Botting notes of traditional Gothicism, “Through its presentations of supernatural, sensational and terrifying incidents, imagined or not, Gothic produced emotional effects on its readers rather than developing a rational or properly cultivated response” (4). In Otranto, superstition is first present in the ancient prophesy which announces the end of Manfred’s line. It also surfaces in the presence of ghostly Alfonso the Great, whose giant helmet crushes the heir to the throne, and whose groans send fears into the inhabitants of the castle. In “My Last Duchess,” the protagonist layers her face in frozen Noxzema, believing it will increase her (brain)power but also create a ghostly visage. While Otranto has a more obvious source of terror in its supernatural presence than “My Last Duchess,” the conclusions of the two stories reveal how terror has evolved. Early Gothic fictions, according to Botting, place the emphasis on “expelling and objectifying threatening figures of darkness and evil, casting them out and restoring proper limits: villains are punished; heroines well married” (10); however, the threat is not expelled in more modern examples of Gothic fiction. The terror of the ghostly in Otranto neutralizes the horror of the tyrannous Manfred by ending his line and restoring the proper line to the throne. However, in “My Last Duchess,” the protagonist’s desire for persuasion remains unresolved. While the protagonist may have ceased to struggle with Bill to accept her reading of the poem, the reader is left knowing that similar struggles will occur, as Atwood highlights the cyclical nature of the protagonist’s relationships, because, as in
Browning’s poem where the presence of a last Duchess “implies that there may be a next Duchess” (Atwood 65), Atwood’s story emphasizes the succession of figures in the protagonist’s life: teachers, boyfriends. While in both Browning’s poem and Atwood’s story, the Gothic threat remains unresolved, the mental persuasion provides a new terror which lingers after the book has been closed.

Atwood is certainly not alone in her contemporary subversion of Gothic conventions, as Botting notes: “In a world which, since the eighteenth century, has become increasingly secular, the absence of a fixed religious framework as well as changing social and political conditions has meant that Gothic writing, and its reception, has undergone significant transformations” (2). Botting even goes so far as to suggest that this evolution makes it “impossible to define a fixed set of conventions” (15). Given the long evolution of the Gothic genre and its related criticism, it is not surprising that the term is constantly under redefinition. Without a doubt, defining the parameters of the Gothic is integral to any study of the genre. Botting suggests,

While much Gothic fiction can be seen as a way of imagining an order based on divine or metaphysical principles that had been displaced by Enlightenment rationality, a way of conserving justice, privilege and familial and social hierarchies, its concern with modes of representing such an order required that it exceed the boundaries of reason and propriety. It is in this context that Gothic fiction can be said to blur rather than distinguish the boundaries that regulated social life, and interrogate, rather than restore, any imagined continuity between past and present,
nature and culture, reason and passion, individuality and family and society. (47)

Botting highlights the convergence of binaries as a rule of Gothic fiction. He suggests they are a destabilizing force. Atwood’s examination of these liminal spaces puts her in line with other Southern Ontario writers. Rather than seeing these convergences as harmful and terrorizing, or, as Hurley suggests of the Southern Ontario Gothic, entrapping, Atwood finds these moments to be revealing and productive.

It seems that since Timothy Findley mentioned his novel, *The Last of the Crazy People*, to Graeme Gibson in 1973 (*Eleven Canadian Novelists*) and affirmed “sure, it's Southern Gothic, Southern *Ontario* Gothic” (138), Southern Ontario Gothic has become a commonplace term in Canadian Literature. Nevertheless, little formal study has defined just what, beyond simply the location, distinguishes Southern Ontario Gothic from its other regional counterparts. Though it opens with an epigraph by Atwood, Justin Edwards’ *Gothic Canada* lacks any mention of the Southern Ontario subgenre. Undoubtedly, he would not have been able to analyze every regional form of Gothicism throughout Canada in the space of his monograph. However, *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Post-Colonial Gothic*, edited by Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte (also opening with an epigraph by Atwood), examines a variety of subcategorized versions of Canadian Gothic, such as Catholic Gothic, Northern Gothic, and Ukrainian-Canadian Gothic. In fact, there are repeated mentions of Southern Ontario Gothic in this set of essays. Unfortunately, superficial comments such as “[t]he much-heralded 'homegrown' genre of Southern Ontario Gothic” (xvii), and “the well-known
Southern Ontario Gothic” (105), fall short of a complete discussion of the subgenre, taking for granted that the term is in common currency.

Previous critical work on the Southern Ontario Gothic has foregrounded the fluidity of its adaptation of Gothic conventions in order to present them in a realist mode. Hurley has made a significant contribution to the genre in his examination of John Richardson and Graeme Gibson.¹ He hypothesizes on why the subgenre can appear to be so elusive: “[R]evising, updating, subverting and mutating traditional Gothic, Southern Ontario Gothic reveals its writers playing creatively with many possibilities. And they are legion” (“Negotiating with the Dead” 51). While this fluidity makes the subgenre resist definition, Hurley highlights a common thread: the representation of “the 'Everyday life' in this curious province as it is refracted, clarified and constructed in the 'underground universe' of Southern Ontario Gothic, a Gothic mode that takes a somewhat different form in a New World context from that of the Old-World prototype” (46). The scariest part of the genre is that the terror does not cease, as it is a daily occurrence. Where the Old-world prototype allowed the Gothic to be placed in another country with fantastical attributes, Southern Ontario Gothic is much more realist. The source of the terror, he posits, is that the literature of Southern Ontario, particularly as seen in Richardson and Gibson, presents a “phantasmagorical borderland, a dual universe in which worlds collide as well as coincide, complementing and running into one another” (The Borders of Nightmare 4). I will be using this definition of Southern Ontario Gothic as a lens through which to view Atwood’s use of liminal spaces in the daily lives of her characters.

¹ Michael Hurley is currently working on a monograph examining Graeme Gibson’s use of Southern Ontario Gothic to complement his article on the same subject.
While Hurley is certainly at the forefront of the current academic discussion of the subgenre, Atwood has taken strides in bringing awareness to the subgenre, both through her use of it in fiction and her discussion of it in prose. Atwood taught two courses entitled “Southern Ontario Gothic” at the University of Alabama (1985) and at New York University (1986). She also wrote a CBC radio special, “Southern Ontario Gothic,” which provides an overview of works and major characteristics that form the subgenre. Upon listing a variety of authors, she notes, “They're all from Southern Ontario and they all exist at a conjunction of two streams: one, the literary use of a very particular, very local history, replete with detail; and two, the use in various forms of a certain set of literary conventions which I will call Gothic” (3). Atwood shows the subgenre’s emphasis on both the geography and history of the region of Southern Ontario, suggesting that the area itself is rife with Gothic tensions and liminal spaces.

Regionalism is not only key to the multiplicity of Canadian Gothic literature but also demonstrates the uniqueness of each regional Gothic literature. Frank Davey has done a fair bit of work in examining regionalism through the lens of literary studies. He notes that “[r]egionalisms, despite their foregrounding of geography, rarely have a concurrency of geophysical and political boundaries. They find themselves both within and without the larger society which they experience as oppositional to them” (7). Davey also notes the difficulty for Southern Ontario in finding itself outside of the national structure: “In literature at the very least, Southern Ontario regionalism has been successful largely by being invisible, by resisting precise territorial definition and by

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2 by Margaret Atwood. © O.W. Toad Ltd. From the Margaret Atwood papers at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MS 335 Box 90 Folder 12. Reprinted with permission of the author.
passing itself as the Canadian nationalism” (6). In this way, Southern Ontario becomes a region of Canada. While it may still be viewed by the outside as the stand-in for the nation, Southern Ontario does indeed require a definition as a region unto itself.

It is, of course, essential to define the boundaries of this region. While J. Lewis Robinson does not consider Toronto and Ottawa integral parts of the region, referring only to “Southwestern Ontario,” I will be including these areas, as they provide an excellent contrast for their natural surroundings, such as the Ottawa River and Lake Ontario. As Donald Putnam notes,

> The reader will note immediately that these [regions] do not coincide with any of the regional patterns of land form, climate, vegetation and soils which have been observed. They are not regions which might be readily agreed upon from inspection of a map of population distribution. They are not even political divisions. They are admittedly regions of convenience and their boundaries are arbitrary. Yet they are realities, known, understood and accepted by most Canadians without questions. (41)

While the western, southern and eastern boundaries are formed by bodies of water (Lake Huron, Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, and the Ottawa River, respectively), the difficulty lies in placing the northern boundary. Putnam points to the northern border “along the line of the Mattawa River, Lake Nipissing and French River” (213). This definition of Southern Ontario permits a study of a large number of Atwood’s works under the banner of “Southern Ontario Gothic,” incorporating those works set in Toronto (such as *Cat’s Eye*), and those that are set in the area of Algonquin Provincial Park (such as *Wilderness*).
Tips [1992]. This geographic range allows for representations of urbanized centres and wilderness expanses, which become not only key settings, but contrasting tropes that are important to the genre.

Binaries such as civilization and wilderness are common tropes in many traditional Gothic works, as are the presentations of binaries in general. Most obviously and generally, the paradigmatic Gothic binary is that of good and evil. The terror characteristic of the Gothic comes from the evil infringing on the good. To dispel the tension, the evil must be relegated back to its side of the boundary. Often this binary of good and evil represents other social binaries, such as science and religion (as in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*), and as such, each writer places these binaries in a hierarchy, selecting one as “good” and condemning the other as “evil”. Southern Ontario Gothic, like Gothic, is driven by tensions that arise from the meeting of such binaries. Atwood’s version of Southern Ontario Gothic, however, offers her characters a chance to calm these Gothic tensions. The terror of Southern Ontario Gothic arises from the imposition of a hierarchical structure. When allowed to coexist naturally, these seeming opposites can remain harmoniously together, providing opportunities for the characters to explore the dualities that lie within themselves. In *Violent Dualities*, Sherrill Grace notes that Atwood’s use of binaries suggests that freedom “does not come from denying or transcending the subject/object duality of life; it is not duality but polarity that is destructive” (3). As succinct as Grace’s analysis is, she does not examine the implications of the Gothic tensions created by attempts to polarize these binaries, creating a liminal space characteristic of Southern Ontario Gothic.
Both Hurley and Atwood foreground four important conventions of Gothic literature which feature prominently in Southern Ontario Gothic to highlight the false binaries inherent in society. The first, as Atwood notes, is “the possibility of magic (as distinct from the Biblical Will of God and so forth) and the belief that the dead can in some way still be alive and can interact with the living” (“Southern Ontario Gothic” 5). The “[m]agic and marvels – a world of wonders within so-called everyday ordinary experience” (“Negotiating with the Dead” 50) as Hurley terms it, is ever-present in Atwood's works in Southern Ontario Gothic, and as such, will feature in all three chapters of this thesis, from the examination of the European mythology of the savage Native in Chapter One, to the notion of the undead in Chapter Two, and to the idea of ghosts in Chapter Three. By having this magic and myth running throughout so much of her work, Atwood reveals that history, which should dwell in the realm of reason, is indeed much like magic and myth. Atwood reveals that by residing in the liminal space between reason and magic, history remains elusive and subject to interpretation. Atwood rejects the idea that history can be defined collectively and suggests, rather, that it must be established personally.

Atwood's next criterion relates to a terror that tends to be more prevalent in Canadian Gothic given the wilderness terrain, that of animal transformations (5). She does note that such metamorphoses occur commonly in fairy tales, as with frog princes, or in werewolf stories. However, in order to discover this motif within the more quotidian or mundane reality of Southern Ontario Gothic, Chapter One will examine the heart of this terror: the convergence of the wilderness and civilization. Hurley notes that Southern
Ontario Gothic “dramatizes a tense world of marvels and horrors that is doubly restrictive; it disturbingly combines a suffocating feeling of entrapment in the natural domain with one of equal intensity in the Procrustean bed of an antiquated and perverting social order” (51). While Hurley suggests both settings are antagonistic in their own right, Atwood and Atwood scholarship tends to focus on the artificial construction of society as a threat to the naturalness of the wilderness, suggesting that Atwood endorses nature over society (for example, the work of Coral Ann Howells, Erin Aspenlieder, or Rebecca Raglon). However, Atwood also presents the wilderness as threatening, such as in *Wilderness Tips*, “Dreams of the Animals” and “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer.” Rather choosing to prefer one setting over the other, she strives to find a moment when both sides can peacefully co-exist. In *Cat’s Eye*, Atwood uses Elaine’s struggles to find her way in the world of the city as she must unlearn the lessons she learned growing up in the wilderness. She repeatedly reveals the artificial construction of the rules of society regarding the roles of the genders. Given these constructions, fitting in the appropriate role in society becomes a terrorizing process for Elaine. However, Atwood also explores the fear of solitude in the wilderness. While Elaine is alone in the city because she resists social roles, she is equally alone in the wilderness because of the lack of human connection. She has inklings of society, gleaned from books, and, even without having extensively experienced town or city life, feels nonetheless like an exile from society. The characters of *Wilderness Tips* are in the opposite position: they are skilled at social situations but cannot interact with nature. The characters attempt to experience the wilderness but are unable to access the natural setting except through artificial means. As
a result, they are unable to recognize the power that nature has. Atwood suggests that points where civilization and wilderness converge generate moments of terror only when the two settings attempt to overpower each other. Instead, her use of this liminal space, where wilderness and society meet, suggests that both are valuable to a person’s development of a well-rounded character necessary for true survival in Southern Ontario society.

Atwood’s definition of Southern Ontario Gothic includes a narrative composed of “descents into the underworld and forays into the realm of frozen time” (5). Hurley suggests that Southern Ontario Gothic “has elements of what Frye identifies as descent narrative, a traditional storytelling pattern that emerges ‘localized’ in diverse ways in Ontario fiction and here, certainly, is given what we would now call a postmodernist twist. [It] is full of self-referential echoing and overlapping” (58). Chapter Two examines Atwood’s use of one of the most common binaries in Gothic fiction: life and death. Atwood sees life and death not simply as physical states. Instead, she examines the moments in which a character can be considered both living and dead. She uses the tropes of Classical mythology by suggesting that Southern Ontario is, in essence, the Underworld. Atwood highlights the similarities between Southern Ontario and the Underworld in *The Blind Assassin*: the passage of water to enter Southern Ontario; the darkness of her imagery; and the presence of the gatekeeper, Richard, the novel’s villain. In this mythic environment, *morts-vivants*3 – those who are neither simply dead nor simply living – can wander the mortal plane. Norval, the father of the narrator(s), is the first *mort-vivant*. Unable to accept what he witnessed serving in the Great War, he

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3 The term *mort-vivant* is also used by Hurley in his discussion of Southern Ontario Gothic.
ventures to the land of the dead in a search for meaning. His daughter, Laura, is prevented from relaying the meaning of her life to her sister Iris while she is still alive, instead having to haunt Iris through stories and memories. Iris, as well, journeys into the Underworld in search of meaning, having been unhappy in the life she was forced into by her father and by society. Iris’s return to the land of the living coincides with her death, which Atwood places prior to Iris ending her tale to her estranged granddaughter. By blurring the distinction between life and death, Atwood’s narrative ordering of the text (which is not strictly obedient to the chronology by which characters live and die) creates the novel’s “ghosts” which serve to warn the reader against the condition of the living dead in which several of the characters are trapped. Instead, Atwood provides her characters with the opportunity to reflect on themselves and determine a purpose for their life that would make them truly alive in their experiences.

Atwood's Southern Ontario Gothic radio program also examines “[t]wins and doubles [that] abound in this [Gothic] material” (5). My third chapter examines the notion of twins through the binary of “self” and “other,” as presented in Lady Oracle, Cat’s Eye, and Alias Grace. The protagonists attempt to confess the deeds of their youth in order to move towards peace in their adulthood. In each case, this confession is forestalled by their desire to repress memories of themselves which cause them shame. By repressing these memories, the three protagonists accept a constructed version of their identity. In a sense, they have become “(an)other” rather than being “the self.” Their true selves, or “dismembered souls,” to borrow Hurley’s term (56), surface as ghostly figures. At the end of each novel, the characters have the option of amalgamating their two versions of their
identity and making a true confession of who they are, or continuing to live a divided life.

The criteria of the supernatural easily fit into the quotidian nature of the Southern Ontario Gothic, but are further enhanced by the sense of the “local” – both in terms of geography and history. In my conclusion, I will examine the way the geographical, historical and cultural particularity of Southern Ontario is essential to the understanding of the liminal spaces in terms of both Atwood scholarship and Southern Ontario Gothic studies. Whereas Atwood studies have examined many of these binaries, even at times from a Gothic standpoint, the emphasis on the regional setting highlights the presence of Southern Ontario Gothic, and, more importantly, provides an opportunity for hope and progress through the acceptance that these binaries are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Atwood seeks to offer the fictional characters of Southern Ontario an opportunity to free themselves from the entrapment inherent in Southern Ontario’s liminal space and move towards a means of living and understanding themselves which accepts both parts of the binary.
CHAPTER ONE: WHERE THE CITY AND WILDERNESS COLLIDE:

WILDERNESS TIPS AND CAT’S EYE

Early in Atwood’s discussion of “In Search of Alias Grace,” she comments, “you'll note that, being Canadian, I put the geology first” (1504). Following her example, this chapter will examine the physical setting of two works set in Southern Ontario to highlight Atwood’s liminal spaces. Atwood’s interest in literary interpretations of the Canadian wilderness is obvious: she has written a great deal on the landscape of Canada in her prose works, from Survival to Strange Things. While she examines landscapes on the national scale in these prose works, her fictional works are set primarily within the region of Southern Ontario. Given the close proximity of civilization and wilderness in a small geographic region, Atwood centres her work on the liminal space where the two environments coexist, examining how the characters feel trapped between the two worlds. On the surface, Atwood's works appear to assert the purity of the wilderness as preferable to the artificial regulation of the urban setting, but these settings are constantly struggling for superiority over each other, and over those who inhabit their space.

Atwood’s stories in Wilderness Tips examine civilization’s attempts at “roughing it in the bush,” as author-settler Susanna Moodie would have termed it. In contrast, her work, Cat's Eye, brings this conflict to the fore as Elaine, the protagonist, must adjust to the life of the city after having been raised in the wilderness. While the interplay of these power relations between Atwood’s characters and their labyrinthine environments do reveal many of the traditional Gothic forms, the terror Atwood uses to propel her Southern Ontario Gothic tale is the superficiality with which her characters approach the two
settings. The traditional Gothic goes in fear of the incursion of raw nature in its various forms (the wilderness, the other, the id). Atwood's take on the Gothic is the opposite, as she suggests that what is truly scary are unnatural representations of the wilderness by Southern Ontario society.

This Southern Ontario society, seen most clearly through in the city of Toronto, is predominantly a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant society, which narrows, in these texts, to Scottish Presbyterianism. The social remaking of the wilderness is most obvious in Atwood’s short story collection, Wilderness Tips, particularly in the stories “Death by Landscape,” “Wilderness Tips” and “True Trash.” Coral Ann Howells notes: “[I]t is the concept of wilderness which is interrogated, for Atwood now questions wilderness as an authenticated cultural tradition” (211). Howells examines the cultural traditions of survival relating to Canadian identity, as initially set out in Atwood’s Survival. However, these authenticated wilderness experiences are far more sinister on a regional level, caused by the close proximity of the wilderness and the city in Southern Ontario. While characters may believe that they are experiencing wilderness at their respective summer camps, they do begin to suspect that there is something sinister about this version of nature. In “Death by Landscape,” Atwood presents Camp Manitou, a girls’ camp, as unnatural, awash in ignorance and artificiality. While the sleep-away camp seems rather traditional, Atwood causes the reader to question whether these are authentic wilderness experiences by highlighting the artificiality of the circumstances. Faye Hammill correctly

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4 For example, The Castle of Otranto suggests that the forest is “infested by robbers” (Walpole 127), a motif common in fairy tales. The Monk even places the wilderness itself in the realm of the evil, as the devil impales Ambrosio onto the rocks and allows the insects and eagles to eat at his mangled corpse before finally summoning a tempest to drown him in the flooding river (Lewis 441-2).
suggests: “pseudo-wildernesses frequently become Gothic spaces in Canadian literature and this story is no exception,” highlighting “the issue of ‘speaking for’ native Canadians” (56) as a specific point of terror by providing a false cultural background for wilderness adventures. Prior to embarking on the traditional canoe trip, Cappie, the camp leader, sends them off with a “traditional” Native ceremony complete with costumes: “Cappie painted three streaks of red across each of her cheeks with a lipstick” (Atwood “DL” 109). Cappie is demeaning the Aboriginal cultures of the area. She is subscribing to white myths regarding Native traditions. However, Hammill does not note the second issue with this passage. Cappie still possesses lipstick at the camp. Despite being out in the “wilderness,” she still maintains the symbols of social prescription. The artificiality of the wilderness experience is compounded by campers’ continued dependence on societal standards as indicated by their reliance on such things as cosmetics.

Lois recognizes the superficial nature of Cappie’s dependence on white myths of the wilderness after the disappearance and assumed death of her friend Lucy during a canoe trip. Hammill argues: “Atwood's engagement with the horrors of colonialism, in terms of the conflict between white and native Canadians, leads eventually to the question of what it is which haunts the forest. Lois's fear of the North is not a fear of hostile ‘Indians’ lurking in the bushes, nor even a fear of Lucy's ghost: it is her own sense of culpability which frightens her” (58). The wilderness is sanitized for these campers and the traditional horrors of the wilderness are limited to stories. The muted presence of the wilderness in the form of a painting, in Lois’s living room at the end of the story, furthers the idea that Lois has accepted society’s desire to tame the wilderness. Lois notes
that it would be possible to place Lucy’s bones in a box, were they to be found, but suggests that “a dead person is a body” (Atwood, “DL” 121). Lucy’s spirit could not be contained. Similarly, the social habit of taming the wilderness by painting and framing it for placement on walls cannot contain it. Rather, the spirit of the wilderness and those who live in it could be anywhere. Indeed, Lois recognizes that “these paintings are not landscape paintings. Because there are not any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense.... [T]he trees themselves are hardly trees; they are currents of energy, charged with violent colour” (121). While the wildness of nature does indeed seem rather menacing, Atwood reveals that society’s denial of the wilderness’s power is just as dangerous. The threat that Lois faces in this Gothic liminal space is herself. She is not guilty over any role she may have played in the death of her friend, but is guilty for perpetuating a tradition which sees the wilderness only as a painting, rather than viewing it for its spirit, energy and power.

Lois may be aware that she is part of a system that views the wilderness in an artificial light, but she continues to be complicit in this tradition. Cappie accuses her of having contributed to the death of Lucy: “She could see Cappie's desperation, her need for a story, a real story with a reason in it; anything but the senseless vacancy Lucy has left for her to deal with. Cappie wanted Lois to supply the reason, to be the reason” (119). She recognizes that civilization needs an explanation for the inexplicable events of nature. Social conditioning drives Cappie to find a reason for Lucy’s death even if it means believing a lie, and Lois forever feels this social condemnation. Lucy, however, is permitted, in death, to leave the system. Hammill suggests that there is a possibility that
Lucy may have been “carried off by a vengeful native, or a wild animal or else that she has become an animal” (58). While Hammill does not seem to side with any of the options, embracing Atwood's open-ended story, she does point out that the animal transformation is a fear of Susanna Moodie's that features prominently in Atwood's *Journals of Susanna Moodie*. However, Lois and Lucy feel no fear while in the wilderness, which suggests that it is society that should be feared. Lucy, who makes no noise upon her disappearance, except “a cry of surprise, cut off too soon. Short, like a dog's bark” (Atwood “DL” 116), is lucky to have escaped, as she does not have to face the social treacheries inherent in divorce and disappointment. She has freed herself from being forced to view nature through the gaze of society. She lives exclusively in the wilderness, not trapped in the liminal space between it and society.

“Wilderness Tips” examines this society’s remodeling of nature through another familiar experience: the family cabin. Howells asserts that “Atwood is relying on the wilderness myth in order to show how the particular kind of story in which ‘wilderness’ figures is the product of language and of literary tradition, exposing both its appeal and its anachronism as white colonial fantasy” (211-2). However, Howells does not note the Gothic implications of the postcolonial discourse in the story. Atwood does not have her characters fear the wilderness in itself, as per traditional Gothic convention. Rather, Roland, the only brother in the family, expresses that his biggest fear is that his foreign brother-in-law, George, will “wait for them all to croak, and then turn it into a lucrative retirement home for the rich Japanese. He'll sell them Nature, at a huge margin. That's the kind of thing George would do” (Atwood, “WT” 206). Roland’s fear is that he will lose
his (socially prescribed) claim on the land. However, the irony is that the cabin in question stands for the atrocity committed by European colonists and explorers against the Natives and their land. The cabin is named Wacousta Lodge, after the novel Wacousta, which details the struggles of eighteenth-century colonizers and First Nations people to defend the land each believed was theirs. George has just as little claim to the land and to Nature as Roland does. Roland’s inability to prevent George from claiming the land reveals that he too is trapped between a reverence for the land and a commodification of it. In revering it, he must give up control of it. In doing so, he leaves it vulnerable to the villainy of others. Undoubtedly, Atwood is playing with the traditional Gothic trope of dubious inheritance. Just as in The Castle of Otranto, by Horace Walpole, the villain, Manfred seeks for his son to wed to continue his fraudulent claim to the throne, Roland seeks to maintain his family’s, and more generally, his culture’s, claim to the land. Indeed, this illicit ownership of the land reflects the Southern Ontario incarnation of the postcolonial Gothic.5

While “Death by Landscape” does seem to offer Lucy a chance at escape by allowing her to experience nature, “Wilderness Tips” ends yet more menacingly. Portia, Roland’s sister, has a vision that the horizon is “no longer horizontal: it seems to be on a slant, as if there’d been a slippage in the bedrock; as if the trees, the granite outcrops, Wacousta Lodge, the peninsula, the whole mainland were sliding gradually down, submerging” (“WT” 216). In this case, the damage is not caused by civilization conquering the wilderness, but is caused by a third, unnamed party defeating all. Howells

5 Postcolonial Gothic examines the overwriting of an indigenous culture with a colonial culture, creating a palimpsestic tapestry replete with Gothic terror, such as is discussed in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.
suggests that “[t]he ending opens up the possibility for Revisions of the Future” (213), citing Atwood’s final line: “And nothing has happened, really, that hasn't happened before” (221). Howells asserts that Atwood is “opening a space to negotiate different futures, suggesting a way to figure the narrative of Canadian identity” to encompass a multi-voiced, multicultural nationhood (213). Howells’ hopeful interpretation of Atwood’s ending relates to the refiguring of the Canadian identity, and sheds light on the potential to escape the entrapment of the liminal space between wilderness and society. The battle between the two disparate environments will not yield a winner, as both the cabin and the trees are destroyed in Portia’s vision. The traditional Gothic terror emerging from the struggle between the wilderness and the society has been eliminated. In its place is the opportunity to re-imagine the setting of Southern Ontario.

In “True Trash,” Atwood creates Camp Adanaqui, where the influence of society has all but trumped nature. The boys seem to have the usual camp experiences: campfires, canoe trips and dining hall meals. However, Atwood highlights the way in which the camp constructs and tames the wilderness. Eating in a dining hall is exposed as artificial not least because the boys do not hunt, nor gather, nor cook their own food, The rustic log sleeping cabins at Camp Adanaqui don't have electric lights, the toilets are outhouses, the boys wash their own clothes, not even in sinks but in the lake; but there are waitresses, with uniforms and aprons.

Roughing it builds a boy's character, but only certain kinds of roughing it. (Atwood “TT” 7)
Atwood suggests these wilderness experiences are not an attempt to teach the boys the ability to survive in the wilderness, but rather a vehicle through which to reinforce the idea of the supposed propriety of civilization. Allowing the boys to capture, prepare and serve themselves their own meals would bring them dangerously close to the threat of the wilderness: these acts would be considered uncivilized. These camps are influenced by the traditional Gothic threat of the wilderness that needs to be tempered so as not to “corrupt” these youths. However, the Southern Ontario Gothic threat of the artificiality of the civilized world remains. The boys are forced to reside in the liminal space between the true wilderness and the true society, balancing their desire to experience wilderness, which society suggests would make men of them, while at the same time remaining “civilized” by these same social standards.

Joanne, the waitress from Camp Adanaqui, further supports the artificial rendering of the wilderness by denying the influence of nature when Ronette, a fellow waitress, finds herself pregnant. Joanne, recounting the tale years later, suggests this story is not about the biological implications of procreation, reducing the accidental pregnancy to “an archaic story, a folktale, a mosaic artefact.” She adds: “It's a story that would never happen now” (Atwood “TT” 30). Joanne believes in the power of technology—birth control—to circumvent nature. In choosing to deny that nature still plays a role in her life, she becomes complicit in society’s desire to limit nature. In order to escape the liminal space between society and wilderness, the characters of *Wilderness Tips* must first recognize the role that they play within the system that seeks to limit nature. They must recognize that society’s attempt to control the wilderness, and thus to limit it to
artificial representations, propels the Gothic terror inhabiting these liminal spaces. Upon experiencing the wilderness outside of these social representations, they can tame the terror and see the wilderness for its power and splendor.

Elaine, in *Cat’s Eye*, does not try to limit nature as Southern Ontario society typically does; rather, she respects the “wildness” of nature. Myles Chilton believes that “Elaine does not romanticize the wilderness, and neither do her parents” (“Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* and Toronto as the Urban Non-Place” 158). Rather than viewing her family as great explorers conquering the wilderness, Elaine remembers her father's admonition to be part of nature and “make it look as if you haven't been there at all” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 28). Whether by burying their toilet paper or by observing but not trapping animals, the Risleys leave no trace of their human presence in the woods. While the family does sleep in tents, and occasionally in motels, Elaine also refers to staying in “abandoned logging camps” (29) and “scavenging along the ground” (35). Atwood presents the Risley family as more akin to animals than to other humans. They are able to move through the wilderness without fear of becoming lost or trapped because they respect the wilderness’s power and help to ensure its sanctity. Rather than adapting the wilderness to accommodate them, the Risleys accommodate themselves to the wilderness. Instead of complaining about the mosquitoes and applying chemical concoctions to deter them from biting her, Elaine has become “used to them” (87). Stephen teaches her to see in the dark, rather than using flashlights or torches (33). Elaine recognizes that mosquitoes and darkness are part of nature. To deny their existence would be to deny the integrity of nature.
Atwood separates the Risleys from the bulk of society. Instead, she suggests that in their attempt to leave the land as though they had never been there, the Risleys are like the Native people Elaine sees on a trip out of Toronto: “scenery” (192). Howells argues: “The myth of the wilderness as unexplored blank space is a white myth, of course; the bush did not feel blank to the indigenous Native peoples, for they lived there and they knew it in detail” (207). Howells’ theory would suggest that Elaine has allowed the white myth to change her vision, so she does not see the Native people but simply a blank wilderness. However, I suggest that Elaine has yet to have been indoctrinated by the societal view of nature. She does not see the Natives as separate from the details of the wilderness, but as part of the wilderness. In working with the land, rather than against it, the Natives, and by extension, the Risleys, have become a part of the world of the wilderness. Quite easily, they could victimize the wilderness, much as the rest of society does. At the abandoned logging camp in which the Risleys reside in their first summer away from Toronto, Atwood describes the cutover section where “[o]nly the roots and stumps remain” (CE 90). Southern Ontario, especially as driven by consumer culture and industrial development, clearly has the power to alter nature at its will. The Risleys have chosen not to abuse it, resisting the social view of nature that allows society to overpower their natural surroundings.

However, this society still remains present in the Risleys’ wilderness adventures. Atwood mentions Sault Ste. Marie, North Bay and Sudbury being “north” of the summer camps (29). As these cities are not too far from the border between Northern and Southern Ontario, the Risleys’ wilderness adventures are rooted in Southern Ontario. And
as this region is home to both wilderness and civilization in such a small area, there are constant reminders that society is not far away. In fact, the two intersect, creating liminal spaces between wilderness and society. Not only is there the abandoned logging camp, there are also remnants of toilet paper in the woods along the highway (28), and silver foils of cigarette packages littered on the ground (30). The examples of society’s incursion into the wilderness are not shining examples of progress that reflect positively on urbanization. Instead, these reveal the damage that this progress causes. Such infiltration cannot be avoided, even in the most remote areas.

Indeed, the victimization of the wilderness reveals nature’s own lack of Gothic threat, contrary to the traditional suggestion of the wilderness’s inherent savagery and wildness. However, the wilderness does contain dangers. Surprisingly, there are few mentions of the danger of frost bite, animal attacks, rapids or escarpments. Instead, the real peril seems to be the lack of human connection. While there are references to towns encountered along the Risleys’ travels, the mentions of human interaction outside of the family are limited: Elaine’s father “[chews] the fat” (87) with storekeepers and other customers along the road. The use of idiomatic expressions reveals the superficial nature of these exchanges. There is no meaningful human connection garnered from these interactions. It comes as no surprise that Elaine views these trips out of the city as a “lapse back into wordlessness” (193). While Elaine is traveling with her family, the exchange of ideas seems limited. Despite her interest in analyzing the ears of her family in the car, she has little communication with them. She comments: “It's difficult to whisper into my brother's round ears when we're in the car. In any case he can't whisper
back, because he has to look straight ahead” (27). Not only is conversation restricted to quiet whispers, but also it is limited to one side. Elaine, even without ever having experienced any, wishes for “some friends, friends who will be girls. Girl friends. I know these exist, having read about them in books, but I’ve never had any girl friends because I’ve never been in one place long enough” (36). Rather than learning of social conventions through human interaction, she learns through home schooling textbooks (37). The silent world of the wilderness has prevented her from examining social conventions through experience. In this way, Elaine is placed in the position of victim.

While the wilderness should have taught her skills of survival, it has been her social downfall. She is unable to manage a social and psychological integration into the society of Toronto schoolgirls she is soon to join.

Indeed, the cityscape which Elaine enters carries the bulk of the novel’s particular, Southern Ontario Gothic terror; the city is threatening in its attempts to mediate the wilderness. Chilton asserts, “[T]he city, Toronto, has grown from the wilderness. *Cat's Eye* starts from a definitive split between city and wilderness; but when the narrative enters the city, it trails with it certain of the uncivilized elements of the forest” (“Urban Non-Place” 157). While the untamed nature of the wilderness may continue once the story enters the city, the wilderness has not been dragged in. Rather, the city attempts to drown out the wilderness. This overpowering is best seen through the Risleys’ house. When her family first arrives, Elaine notes, “The house is hardly on a street at all, more like a field” (*CE* 40). In stark contrast to the perfect houses shown in her school readers, the Risleys’ house is incomprehensible to Elaine. The house
symbolizes a more permanent lifestyle, characteristic of the city, in contrast to the nomadic life of the wilderness. Despite the symbolism of the house, there is something uncanny, even Gothic about it: it appears to be in the middle of nowhere, neither in the wilderness nor in the city. To borrow the term from Chilton, the Risleys are moving to a non-urban space, a very liminal space. Even more uncanny is the way in which Elaine describes the urbanization of the area. While there is originally a pile of dirt and a hole in the lot beside their house (41-2), a house appears there “suddenly” (178). Elaine does not acknowledge the building process, which she would have inevitably experienced, but rather views it with shock at the mastery with which the society has been able to trump the wilderness.

After a number of years of being surrounded by dirt, the family has a home more aligned with the images from Elaine's reader: “The lawn is a lawn now. In the garden they've planted a peach tree, a pear tree, an asparagus bed, rows and rows of vegetables” (271). While grass and trees are naturally occurring in the wilderness, here they have been tamed into submission for consumption by people in the city according to the cultural prescriptions available even to schoolchildren. It is restrictive: lawn and garden, rather than grass and plant. As Atwood states in *Survival*, “The order of Nature is labyrinthine, complex, curves; the order of Western European Man tends to be square, straight lines, oblongs and similar shapes” (120). Elaine becomes so accustomed to this controlled version of nature that she even comments years later, “It's surprising how little has changed” (*CE* 562). While it may be true that the area has changed little since

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6 Atwood has previous portrayed the contrasting patterns of the wilderness and society in “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer” (*Selected Poems*, 60-63).
Elaine's last visit before her parents sold the house, she discounts all the changes that occurred from the day they first moved in. She chooses to ignore the trauma the wilderness in the area has undergone as the city has attempted to tame nature.

However, this trauma does still surface. Despite not remembering any change to the house, the adult Elaine is offended by the changes that are occurring in the rest of the city. Keith suggests, “Between the end of the Second World War and the late 1960s, Toronto changed more conspicuously and more drastically than at any other period in its history after the early nineteenth century” (228). Even though she lives in the city during this time of change, Elaine is hyper-aware of the changes that have occurred since she left. She notes that Eaton's has been replaced by “a huge building in its place, what they call a shopping complex, as if shopping were a psychic disease. It's glassy and be-tiled, green as an iceberg” (Atwood, CE 150). Elaine certainly presents the image in Gothic terms, a building looming in the skyline, teeming with madness, in order to highlight the danger that Western consumer society presents. Southern Ontario society adopts this consumerism in an attempt to situate itself as a “world-class city,” undermining the natural geography that makes it unique. While the proliferation of such structures does show the degradation of the city by further consumerism, Elaine does not recognize that the consumerism started when Eaton's itself was established, edging out more of the wilderness. However, Chilton argues, “Not surprisingly, Elaine does not go in. The Eaton Centre too effectively evacuates any sense of the Toronto she is trying to see” (“Two Toronto Novels” 58). While Chilton does note that Eaton's was “once one of Toronto's flagship department stores,” Elaine's feeling of being a stranger in this city comes not just
Elaine finds the city in general disorienting because it is so unlike the wilderness, and while she recognizes there is an order, she does not understand it. It also seems labyrinthine, fitting both the wilderness and the urban settings within this Gothic trope of confusion and terror. While the architecture has shifted between Elaine's youth and her visit as an adult, the changing social expectations disorient her. When the family moves to the city when she is a child, she must suddenly deal with new rules that did not exist in the wilderness. For one, Elaine soon discovers that there are proper ways to dress in the city. In the wilderness, she wears “a blue-striped jersey of [her] brother's, a worn pair of corduroy pants” (Atwood CE 86). This wilderness wardrobe is in stark contrast to the rules of the city: “You can't wear pants to school, you have to wear skirts” (59). Elaine reveals how wasteful the rules of the city are, insisting on feminine dress and stark gender coding. While in the wilderness, Elaine wears hand-me-downs from her brother; the city does not necessarily scorn hand-me-downs – as Cordelia is noted to wear all the clothing, including underwear, that had belonged to her sisters (77) – but limits their use. These references reflect the Gothic tradition of sexual vulnerability, such as is signaled through feminine attire. In Dracula, both Lucy and Mina succumb to the lure of the vampires late at night while in nothing but their nightdresses (Stoker 89, 282). The society of Cat’s Eye
accepts this Gothic notion of sexual vulnerability. Elaine rightfully questions the social creation of strict rules for gender fashion, which do not permit her to wear her brother's clothing but would permit her to use older female siblings' underwear, a much more intimate piece of apparel. Sharon Rose Wilson believes that “Elaine gradually learned how to exist under the Gaze [of society]...: one is judged according to adherence to rules. Girls must wear different clothing than boys” (183). While Elaine could feasibly continue wearing her brother’s clothing, it would mark her as an outsider or a failure in society. The re-writing of the biological differences of gender into social prescriptions of fashion seems illogical to Elaine. Unable to understand these rules, Elaine becomes trapped between the natural and the unnatural, the wilderness and society.

Even less logical to Elaine are the rules regarding the entry into the school house:

At the back are two grandiose entranceways with carving around them and ornate insets above the doors, inscribed in curvy, solemn lettering: GIRLS and BOYS. When the teacher in the yard rings her brass handbell we have to line up in twos by classrooms, girls in one line, boys in another, and file into our separate doors. The girls hold hands; the boys don't. If you go in the wrong door you get the strap, or so everyone says. (60)

Rather than the door being simply a means to entering a building, it has become a liminal space through which one enters a gendered world. Not only does it show that conformity is important to this society but also that it is interested in distinctly differentiating males from females. Elaine observes, “How is going through a door different if you're a boy?.... They go in the BOYS door and end up in the same place we do” (60). She recognizes that
biology plays a role in the separation of males and females regarding bathrooms. She suspects there must be something distinct about the two doors of which she is unaware because she cannot find the logic given the information she has. In fact, there is very little logic behind it beyond puritanical beliefs that boys and girls must be kept separate in order to reduce any impropriety that may occur.

All the more sinister is the fact that Elaine is unaware of what the rules actually are, creating a Gothic sense of disorientation and vulnerability to incomprehensible forces. Elaine highlights the arbitrary nature of the imaginary stack of plates that Cordelia suggests crash whenever Elaine does something she deems questionable. Elaine recognizes that “[Grace's] crashes are tentative, she looks to Cordelia for confirmation. Carol tries a crash once or twice but is scoffed at” (232). It seems only the person enforcing the rules is aware of them. While the stack of plates may be the young girls’ imaginary representation, it represents the social codes that the girls must learn. Elaine eventually walks away from Cordelia; however, even in doing so, Elaine is not free of these rules. As Molly Hite mentions, instead of an external force regulating her behaviour, she has internalized the surveying eye of the victor, and is a victim of her own self-degradation (139). As an adult, Elaine uses “misery, and enchantment” (Atwood, CE 17), two very Gothic terms, to describe the powerful and inexplicable control that Toronto culture, especially through its vehicles, Carol, Grace and Cordelia, exerts over her. As Mary Jarrett asserts, “Enchantment in this context suggests the opposite of misery, but it becomes clear that Elaine is referring to the near-diablic role of the enchanter Cordelia, the nine-year-old whose bullying almost causes Elaine's death as a
child, and tempts her to suicide as an adult” (178). Indeed, Atwood enhances Cordelia’s enchanting character by having her express the desire to play the first witch in an upcoming staging of *Macbeth*, and telling Elaine: “‘The Old Man says I might be ready for it. He thinks it would be brilliant to have a young First Witch’” (405). The rules, as represented by Cordelia, are as sinister as black magic to Elaine, as she can neither understand them nor free herself from them.

As an adult, Elaine does eventually find herself able to follow the rules, even if she does not clearly understand them. However, these rules are not static. She is still disoriented when she returns to Toronto. The city itself is a Gothic labyrinth, even while bearing the near-familiar traits of Southern Ontario consumer culture: “I revolve through the revolving doors into Simpsons, where I become lost immediately. They’ve changed the whole thing over” (Atwood *CE* 151). The physical layout of the store is like a maze to Elaine. However, it is not simply the reorganization of the departments that confuses her. She steps on the escalator going the wrong direction (152). Most strikingly, she loses herself entirely, coming out of a memory to discover herself “fingering a sleeve... in the middle of Simpsons Girlswear” (155). Losing herself in space, as well as in time, Elaine discovers the store itself to have a sinister magic to it. Elaine describes the product marketing surrounding her as “religion. Voodoo and spells... I’d use anything if it worked – slug juice, toad spit, eye of newt, anything at all to mummify myself” (151-2). Despite highlighting the sinister nature of the products being sold through an allusion to the witches’ brew in *Macbeth*, Elaine reveals a deep desire to fall prey to the social conventions of beauty and to be accepted as flawless. However, she still falls short of
achieving these societal expectations and remains lost in this labyrinthine world. After being rebuffed by the perfume lady (152), she is launched into a memory of the trauma of her childhood, followed by her fear of passing that same vulnerability onto her children (154-5). While most Gothic tropes of flawed inheritance relate to “the usurpation of property or titles, placing inheritance... at risk” (Albright 15), Elaine is afraid she will pass on her ignorance of social codes to her daughters, evoking a modern social Gothic terror. It seems that as soon as Elaine believes she has learned the rules they change, leaving her as confused as she was when she first entered society.

Elaine is indeed a victim of this liminal space: she is aware that there are rules, but feels powerless not only to free herself from them, but also to understand them. She is fully aware that her behaviour is under scrutiny by everyone and everything. While in her childhood, when Cordelia, Grace and Carol all are critical of her, she becomes paranoid that there is a larger panoptical structure at play. She covers a doll’s face, believing it has the ability to gaze and judge (Atwood 173). She recognizes that she will constantly be feeling a lack. The ads which she reads in the ladies’ magazines confirm this surveillance: “This is a Watchbird watching a Busybody... This is a Watchbird watching you” (187). Even Elaine is made to feel as if she must constantly be looking down on herself when Cordelia forces her to look in the mirror (213). The city of Toronto, with its social expectations, is so powerful that Elaine is unable to escape its gaze. Traditional Gothic literature deals with the animation of the inanimate, and the eerie feeling of being watched, both of which can be seen in the monster from Frankenstein being animated (Shelley 85) and stalking Frankenstein (193). However, Southern Ontario Gothic takes
panoptical structures and makes them internal. The social oppression inherent in this story is so powerful that Elaine becomes an enemy of herself when her social consciousness attempts to overpower her natural wilderness upbringing. The labyrinthine task of navigating Toronto’s physical spaces and its social cues has become an internal scenario of confusion and self-loss.

As Chilton discusses, Toronto was formed by urbanization thwarting the wilderness. Instances where the two landscapes are in direct conflict provide the most fruitful examination of the workings of Southern Ontario Gothic liminal space and the message it portrays for the struggle between the two seeming polarities. The convergence of the two is prominent in examples of camping. Elaine's earliest memories of her childhood in *Cat's Eye* involve the family’s nomadic lifestyle:

[We] stop again and put up our tent, heavy canvas with wooden poles. Our sleeping bags are khaki and thick and lumpy, and always feel a little damp. Underneath them we put groundsheets, and inflatable mattresses that make you feel dizzy while you blow them up and fill your nose and mouth with the taste of stale rain boots or spare tires piled in a garage. We eat around the fire, which turns brighter as the shadows grow. (29)

Elaine's version of camping differs from many other families’ experiences of camping only in the fact that their “campground” is truly near the wilderness and not in a sanitized version of it available at various private or public parks. However, Atwood obscures the notion of camping by having the family “camp” in their home when they first move in

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7 See Molly Hite’s article “Optics and Autobiography in Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*” for a more detailed discussion of the panoptical structures present in *Cat’s Eye*
Chilton remarks, “the family that has taken shape in the bush must now camp in their new house. They do so, without any sign of complaint or suffering because this is what they are used to” (“Urban Non-Place”157). Camping, without the luxuries of modern beds and electricity, is traditionally seen as a recreational experience. However, for the Risleys, it is a way of life. They do not notice any inconvenience. As a result, they are able to stay in their unfinished house, as they have not yet begun to take these luxuries for granted. While Elaine begrudgingly enters a society that prescribes electricity, beds and social expectations, her parents do not follow suit. They are much more aware of the consequences: “[Mr. Risley] says Toronto is getting overpopulated, and also polluted. He says the lower Great Lakes are the world’s largest sewer and that if we knew what was going into the drinking water we would all become alcoholics. As for the air, it's so full of chemicals we should be wearing gas masks” (CE 442). Mr. Risley’s bleak view of Southern Ontario society goes beyond the Gothic, becoming almost apocalyptic. Atwood uses Elaine's parents to reveal both sides of this society. By showing their preference for camping as a normal way of life, the Risleys expose the way their surrounding society has made advantages such as electricity normative. To the Risleys, the social idea of “roughing it in the bush” in a way that is complete with the conveniences of modern campsites, is just as illogical as camping in the house is to the rest of society. The normative ideas of camping have become defamiliarized, making the city just as frightening as the wilderness.

The ravines are certainly another place where the city and the wilderness overtly collide. Chilton suggests:
Toronto's ravines feature prominently in virtually all of the literature about Toronto... A grid system of roads was imposed on the landscape to enhance efficiency, and ever since that has been the criteria for the use of space. A more imaginative approach would have seen the rivers, ravines and their destinations, Lake Ontario, not as an impediment but as an organizing principle. (“Urban Non-Place” 157)

The natural geographic features of the region are certainly prevalent in Cat’s Eye. Descriptions such as: “deadly nightshade, its berries red as valentine candies. Cordelia says that if you want to poison someone this would be a good way” and “Cats prowl around in there, we see them every day, crouching, squatting, scratching up the dirt, staring out at us with their yellow eyes as if we’re something they’re hunting” (100) highlight Atwood’s use of the poetic language which foregrounds the Gothic threat found in fairy tales. However, Atwood quickly follows this traditionally Gothic idea that the wilderness is dangerous by describing the social environment surrounding the ravine, highlighting the threat of society. Atwood writes, “Cordelia says that because the stream flows right out of the cemetery it’s made of dissolved dead people. She says that if you drink it or step into it or even get too close to it, the dead people will come out of the stream, all covered with mist, and take you with them” (101). Death is presented as a frightening, Gothic phenomenon, not a natural occurrence. The ravine itself becomes the

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8 Atwood indeed uses ravines in a number of her other works, including The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle, all usages tied to sexual encounters and dangers. The ravine scene in Lady Oracle is very similar to the one in Cat’s Eye.
Valley of the Shadow of Death. Neither the wilderness nor society provides reprieve from terror.  

The ravine is a frequently noted site of trauma for Elaine (as noted by Arnold Davidson, Laurie Vickroy, and Sharon Rose Wilson). The events that take place within it are a microcosm of a larger plight. The ravine bisects the neighbourhood. This converging of nature and society is quintessential to Southern Ontario Gothic in bringing the two elements into direct conflict. Elaine first comments that she must cross it to reach the school (Atwood *CE* 59). In order to do so, she must go over the wooden bridge, which is rotting. In this case, society has attempted to overcome the wilderness, but thus far, the wilderness is fighting back. As a result, society fights again, and constructs a concrete bridge. Years later, when Elaine returns to the neighbourhood of her childhood after having lived outside the city for a number of years, the competition is in a deadlock. The trees around the path have grown, but likewise, the concrete bridge has been built and lit (562).  

Scheckles and Sweeney note that the ravine is “a place of imagined and real terror for young Elaine” (411). Elaine becomes victim to the desire for power and pleasure at the hands of Cordelia and the other young girls. However, Elaine is able to free herself from being trapped under the power of the girls. While Arnold Davidson suggests the events at the bridge are “a metaphoric crossing to adult female sexuality” (54), the scene more accurately represents the metaphoric release from the dominant social power Elaine only finds in Toronto. After being sent into the water and left, essentially for dead, by  

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9 Cemeteries also invoke the Gothic fear of being buried alive, a fate which is almost realized by Elaine, as well. This trope will be examined in Chapter Three.
Cordelia, Elaine finds that her feet are initially too heavy to move (252). Elaine is able to use her survival skills learned in the wilderness to save herself, by using the trees to pull herself out of the water. Upon using these skills, she removes herself from the oppressive force of social judgment, allowing her body to feel “weightless, as it does in water” (253). After she has recovered, she continues to maintain this “light-headed” feeling as she walks away from her friends (260). She has harnessed the power of nature to overcome the oppression of society.

This freedom from social oppression is temporary, as Elaine continues to be victimized in the liminal space between wilderness and society as each attempts to prove its dominance over the other. Vickroy notes:

Atwood examines certain aspects of how power works via women's complicit role in socialization, where they either mimic duties laid out by patriarchy (Mrs. Sneath) or attempt to control others in response to their own denigration (Cordelia by her father). Such actions are not real agency but born of fear and pain, Atwood suggests, and tend to be passed on because in situations of domination one tends to absorb the others' injunctions into oneself. Elaine has been both victim and victimizer (Davidson 17), moving among different victim positions of resigned acceptance, denial and finally rejecting victimhood and victimization.

(141)

Vickroy is quite accurate in noting that Elaine, like Cordelia, is both victim and victimizer, though she does suggest that Elaine escapes her position of victim at the end.
Chilton agrees, saying that Elaine has found a way to reconcile the wilderness and the city by living in Vancouver: “she is careful to point out her lawn, the rain, the giant slugs and that ‘[t]he unreality of the landscape there encourages me’ (15). Her sense of home comes from blending the wilderness with the city” (63). Chilton does not, however, note that Elaine has only moved from the terrifying language of the Gothic to the poetic language of the fairy tale. She describes the landscape as “the greeting-card mountains, of the sunset-and-sloppy-message variety, the cottagy houses that look as if they were built by the Seven Dwarfs in the thirties, the giant slugs so much larger than a slug needs to be” (17). Where threats are expelled at the end of the traditional Gothic tale, allowing a return to the status quo, Elaine believes her story ends more like a fairy tale where the threat is not only expelled, but she is allowed to live happily ever after. However, Elaine is not engaged with the landscape and city in any real way. She is choosing to view it through the lens of unreality. Elaine has been unable to move past the trauma of her childhood bullying that has placed her in the victim/victimizer positions. Afraid for the struggles her daughters will face, paralyzed by fear at times, she is still a victim of the social regulation of Toronto. Without being able to be free of the roles of victim and victimizer, Elaine is both aware that she is under siege and unaware of how she places others under it. She comments while on the plane: “I wonder how old they [the two old ladies sitting behind her] think they are, underneath the disguise of their bodies; or how old they think I am. Perhaps, to them, I look like their mother” (567). Elaine

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10 Elaine moves through Atwood’s victim positions, as set out in Survival. Elaine may become aware that she could save herself from victimhood (entering position three) as she does physically leave the oppressive city. However, her return to it places her back in the second position, and she is overwhelmed by emotions and memories associated with the position. Until she is able to accept these emotions as her own, she will continue to oscillate between the second and third victim positions.
simultaneously judges them while she is aware they are judging her. Her words even echo those of Perdie, Mirrie and later Cordelia: “I look like Haggis McBaggis’... an ugly old woman they seem to have made up” (97, 345). Elaine may be aware that she is judging people and they are judging her, but she is unable to stop being both a victim and a victimizer. Needing the personal connection afforded by society, but unable to understand its unnatural codes, Elaine is trapped in a liminal space marked by a Gothic emphasis on power and victimization.

Atwood explains in Survival: “The poems Canadians tend to make out of ‘settler’ motifs are likely to end, not with a shot of the Los Angeles freeway or equivalent but with the abandonment of the farm with its squares and angles and the takeover of Nature once again. The pattern is struggle without result” (123). While the wilderness seems to defeat the city, the key word in the passage is “the pattern” that continuously recurs. Neither side admits defeat. Atwood attempts not to champion one setting over the other within this small geographic area, but to suggest the need to coexist. The interaction between the wilderness and civilization is far too complex for any of us to see unless we are able to view it from outside of the social system. To Lois, in “Wilderness Tips,” the wilderness is “a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path” (“WT” 121), believing that “it looks different from above, bigger, more hopeless” (121). From the sky, Elaine has “enough [light] to see by” (567), suggesting that there is still a chance she may be able to navigate the labyrinthine liminal space between society and wilderness. However, until Elaine can remove herself from the
entrapment caused by society’s unnatural representation of the wilderness and be able to experience both environments in harmony, she can never see the maze as a whole.
CHAPTER TWO: THE ORDER OF LIFE AND DEATH: 
ATWOOD’S BLURRED BOUNDARY IN THE BLIND ASSASSIN

Margaret Atwood frequently presents the events of her novel non-chronologically. With retrospectives such as Lady Oracle and Cat’s Eye, she examines the impact of memory on versions of the past. In Alias Grace she plays with the passage of time to examine the inability of characters and readers alike to know “the truth.” However, it is The Blind Assassin in which the chronology most clearly determines readers’ perceptions of the characters. Within the novel’s multi-layered plot, readers are offered a variety of perspectives on the pivotal moments in the life of Iris, the protagonist. Critics such as Earl Ingersoll and Ruth Parkin-Gounelas have suggested that these versions help reveal the degree to which Iris is to be held culpable for the death of her sister, her husband and her daughter. However, they have not examined in detail how the order of these events affects the story as a whole. The structure of the novel confuses facts which should be obvious. Characters, whose demises have been announced in one embedded textual form, are active in another, blurring the distinction between life and death. The living dead are a common feature of traditional Gothic tales such as the animated monster in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and the vampire in Bram Stoker’s Dracula. However, the inclusion of these or other traditional undead creatures, such as ghosts or goblins, would undermine the realism of Southern Ontario Gothic. Following in the footsteps of John Richardson, undoubtedly the father of Southern Ontario Gothic (given his status as the first Southern Ontario-born author), Atwood uses mort-vivant\(^\text{11}\) characters: those which

\(^{11}\) I am indebted to Michael Hurley for this term. While his application relates to Wacousa he quotes Atwood’s description of Auntie Muriel from Life Before Man as an illustration for the definition of mort-
are alive on one level but dead on another. Atwood reveals the flexibility in the boundary between life and death through these *morts-vivants* as they travel through the Underworld known as Southern Ontario in their attempt to enunciate a meaning for their lives.

The mixing of the dead and the living is far from a new idea: notions of those crossing the line between this world and the Underworld can be found in many ancient texts, including Greek and Roman ones. While traditional views of the Underworld often suggest that it is a geographic place separated from the world of the living by a physical barrier (so that it is “to the east or to the west” of the ordinary world, “up on high or down below” [Edmonds 22]), Atwood has her *morts-vivants* inhabiting the same geographic sphere as her living characters. Southern Ontario becomes both a Gothic and a mythic space. It is, in Atwood’s handling, the Underworld. Radcliffe Edmonds suggests that the barrier between this world and the next need not simply be distance: “bodies of water frequently appear as barriers, varying in size from the small, ‘running stream they dare na cross’ to the vast depths of the ocean” (22). Not only is the border of Southern Ontario demarcated by water on three sides, but Atwood’s fictional Port Ticonderoga is also isolated geographically by the presence of water. Iris notes: “Port Ticonderoga has two rivers, the Jogues and the Louveteau” (49). Caterina Ricciardi points out the importance of the name of the original Ticonderoga, in present day New York State, which “translated into English, means ‘between two lakes’ (Webster), between Lake Champlain and Lake George” (227), suggesting that Atwood’s fictional Port Ticonderoga is “supposedly between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie” (228). Atwood’s use of the liminal

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*vivant*: “Auntie Muriel is both the spider and the fly, the sucker-out of life juice and the empty husk” (qtd in *The Borders of Nightmare* 174). The mort-vivant in *Wacousta* is represented by De Haldimar, who is unable to accept that his old-world views may have to change in this new world.
and isolated spaces of Southern Ontario in *The Blind Assassin* suggests an analogy to the Underworld regions of classical mythology, which the inhabitants occupy, as well as the liminal space between life and death.

Atwood’s use of light imagery also reflects classical descriptions of the Underworld and highlights the Gothic nature of the setting. Edmonds suggests: “The realm of the dead is often characterized by darkness and shadows that make it easy for the traveler to lose the way” (22). Atwood also has Southern Ontario appear dark. Iris's retrospective journey commences when she is at the local high school’s graduation ceremony, presenting an award given in her sister’s name. She begins to lose her balance as “[d]arkness moved closer... Back into the long shadow cast by Laura” (41). The sky is dark and ominous as she continues to tell her tale: “by mid-afternoon the sky had turned a baleful shade of green” (135). In her youth, Iris even describes her own house in sinister terms: “we learned Avilion inside out: its crevices, its caves, its tunnels” (139). The use of the turret as Norval’s lair (76); the attic as a place of refuge for the fugitive, Alex (211); and the hiding spot of the cellar (139, 210) further the dark, Gothic imagery of the setting. Atwood calls attention to the darkness by highlighting the lightness of the house in which she lives with Richard with its “colours of luxurious indifference, of cool detachment” (306). However, the darkness seems to offer more answers to Iris as she certainly feels more at home in the darkness of Avilion and in the haunted memories of her Gothic castle than in her marital home.

Even with Southern Ontario as the contemporary site of Atwood’s Underworld, the character must still undergo the same journey as those who have gone before her in
earlier myths: “If the traveler has the proper solution for the obstacle he or she faces, then the result will be positive.... For those who have failed to bring the proper solution, an unpleasant fate awaits” (Edmonds 23). Atwood's characters in The Blind Assassin are often stranded at an obstacle somewhere between life and death, reaching different levels of success or failure in their quest for meaning. In the cases of Norval, Laura and Iris, all three must contend with the guardian who prevents or allows entry into the Underworld. While Edmonds does not specifically elucidate a connection between the guardian and the Gothic villain, there is indeed a connection. Edmonds notes: “The solutions for getting past a guardian differ according to the nature of the guardian. A monstrous guardian must often be fought and conquered, whereas a doorkeeper or ferryman must be paid off or placated” (23). The villain must be overcome in order for the hero to continue the journey. In the case of The Blind Assassin, this guardian or villain is Richard, the overbearing husband of Iris who controls the Chase family from the moment he enters the story, causing the characters to seek out answers in the Underworld.

Perhaps it is due to these mythic overtones that little criticism has been written on the Gothic implications of The Blind Assassin.\textsuperscript{12} However, the Gothic is a strong current through this work, particularly with the traditional trappings of the haunted castle (Avilion), mysteries of mistaken parentage and the domineering male villain (Richard\textsuperscript{13}). Donna Heiland asserts the novel “finds a way out of the Gothic not by turning its back on...

\textsuperscript{12} Many of the generic conventions discussed regarding The Blind Assassin seem to be influenced by the novels immediately before and after it. The Blind Assassin has many of the elements of the detective novel and the historiographic metafiction that are found in Alias Grace. Similarly, the novel is also discussed in terms of science fiction, as this novel does show a shift in Atwood's interest from the Gothic form to the science fiction or speculative fiction which shapes some of her following novels (Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood).

\textsuperscript{13}Helena Hyttinen makes this connection in her article, “The Dead are in the Hands of the Living: Memory and Haunting Storytelling in Margaret Atwood's The Blind Assassin” (379).
it, or by insisting on its difference from the world of lived experience, but by acknowledging its terrible reality even as it acknowledges its transformative power” (169-70). Helena Hyttinen also examines *The Blind Assassin* in relation to the Gothic genre, with its interest in “the impact of haunting on storytelling and memory” (374). However, no study has been previously made regarding the ordering of the novel and its disruption of the life-lines of the characters. The order of the novel creates the ghosts that haunt it. Structurally, Atwood has divided the story to prevent a seamless, monophonic and monologic plotline, separating it into sections with chapters further subdividing it. Rather than placing the bulk of the narration on the elder Iris, speaking with one voice and with one intent, Atwood examines the evolution of Iris’s self-narrated history by including variations of the same story in different sections. Characters, whose deaths have been announced in one part, appear to be alive in another, trapping them in the liminal space inhabited by *morts-vivants*.

Norval Chase is one such *mort-vivant*, having already figuratively commenced his journey to the Underworld prior to his death. Iris describes the steps he takes in the turret after his leg has been amputated because of his injuries in the war: “Light step, heavy step, light step, heavy step, like an animal with one foot in a trap. Groaning and muffled shouts” (78). The Gothic images describe Norval in inhuman terms. Iris recollects the vision of her father attempting to dress up as Santa Claus: “There was a man in red, giant towering upwards. Behind him was the night darkness, and a blaze of flame. His face was covered with white smoke. His head was on fire. He lurched forward: his arms were outstretched. Out of his mouth came a sound of hooting, or of shouting” (384). Norval
appears as a demonic beast, the type likely to inhabit both the mythic Underworld, and
the traditional Gothic novel, such as *Frankenstein*. However, Laura suggests that he
was not pretending to be an Underworld demon when he was playing Santa Claus, but
rather that “he was pretending the rest of the time... That this was what he was really
like... That underneath, he was burning up. All the time” (385). While this imagery could
easily be discounted as issuing from the imagination of a child, it properly represents the
struggle that Norval faces in his life. The trauma of his past has caused him to journey to
the Underworld in an attempt to find peace. Because of the horrors he has experienced in
the Great War, Norval is unable to appreciate or see the point of living in this world. His
search for meaning places him somewhere between this realm and the next. Norval is a
beast trapped in his past, despite living in the present.

The descent into spectrality is not simply indicated by his physical appearance:
mentally, he has also descended. For example, he has lost his belief system. Iris recounts,
“a much worse thing had happened: my father was now an atheist. Over the trenches God
had burst like balloon, and there was nothing left of him but grubby little scraps of
hypocrisy” (77). However, his search to bring a new meaning to the world prevents him
from having any connection to his family. Iris describes, in the language of a Gothic tale,
“He loved [his wife]... But he couldn't reach her, and it was the same on her side. It was if
they'd drunk some fatal potion that would keep them apart forever, even though they
lived in the same house, ate at the same table, slept in the same bed” (78). While he may

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14 Much like Norval, the monster in *Frankenstein* does go on a journey to find meaning in his life. Both
experience an isolation which ultimately leads to their desire to die.
inhabit the same physical world that she does, he is mentally on his journey to the Underworld, and also, more than he knows, on his way to being physically dead.

Though still alive, Norval is treated much like a ghost haunting Avilion, his Gothic castle. Laura notes that “Reenie left the trays with his meals on them outside the door” (313) when he would retire to his turret and drink by himself in a fit of rage. While this isolation could merely be a way for Norval to evade his anger and allow him to think in peace, Atwood makes mention of a similar process occurring in haunted houses in Southern Ontario in *Negotiating with The Dead*. She recounts:

> We lived in an old house in rural Ontario during the 1970s, and this house was haunted – so the local people said, and so some visiting the house experienced while we were there – and we asked the lore-conscious woman from the farm across the road what to do. “Leave food out overnight,” she said. “Make them a meal. Then they'll know you accept them, and you won't be bothered.” We felt kind of silly, but we did it, and it worked. (162)

The gifts of food left outside Norval’s turret demonstrate the family’s acceptance of Norval, even with all his ghostly traits and beastly behaviour. But what Norval needs, rather, is to accept himself. He is unable to understand the atrocities he has seen in the war, and is likewise unable to overcome the guilt of having survived when others did not. It is no coincidence, then, that Norval returns to Southern Ontario – the point of access to Atwood’s Underworld – in an attempt to find meaning in his experiences and to attempt to enunciate it to others, such as through the creation of a memorial. Ingersoll suggests
that the Great War memorial in Fort Ticonderoga represents a “cultural tug of war
between those who fought the war and those who need to (mis)remember it for their own self-gratifying desire…. Iris's father [contests] the propaganda that the ‘Great War’ was a noble sacrifice, rather than the meaningless massacre of the innocents” (547). Norval tries to properly memorialize, without propaganda, those who were sacrificed. Not only does he seek to provide realism in the war memorial, wanting “bare-naked realism all the way… the statue would be made of rotting body fragments, of which he had stepped on a good many in his day” (148), but also to hire veterans, believing “the country’s lack of gratitude was despicable, and that its businessmen should now pay back something of what was owed” (79). However, Norval is alone in his desire to pay tribute to the dead for the tragedy of their lost lives, rather than for the supposed glory that others wish to honour. As a result of his misread communications and unexpressed intentions, Norval remains lost in this Underworld.

Unable to cross back to the land of the living, having learned to appreciate his life, he permanently crosses into the land of the dead, drinking himself to death in his turret, setting The Blind Assassin’s Southern Ontario Gothic plot into motion. It is no coincidence that this self-destruction occurs after he simultaneously loses his business and his daughter, in marrying Iris off to Richard. In fact, it is at this point that Atwood subverts the usual Gothic conventions. Indeed, the traditional issues surrounding inheritance are present. Richard Albright suggests that typically, “[t]he themes of usurpation and identity that pervade much popular British fiction from the 1760s through the 1860s reflect anxieties about the orderly transmission of property and cultural values
across generations… [T]here is a secret transgression that poses a threat to this orderly and coherent transmission or [sic] property and identity, a shadow of the past that looms across the present” (24). Norval's hauntings, caused by the guilt of surviving his brothers, reveal the disruption of the family's primogeniture. Norval was not to inherit the family business directly, but as one of three brothers taking part. As an attempt to give his brothers their rightful property, Norval changes the company’s name to “Chase & Sons” despite the fact that he returns from the war as an only child. It is when he uses his daughter as a bargaining chip in order to try to keep this business that he realizes that all of his efforts have been in vain: his way of business (as a way to honour those who have lost everything in the war) is not viable in the cutthroat capitalist society of the Depression. Traditionally, the marriage of Richard and Iris would be seen as a success, providing new life to the business. After all, Albright notes of traditional Gothicism: “After a number of plot turns, the secret past is successfully narrated and the discontinuities usually resolved, so that coherence is achieved in the present and can in turn be transmitted to the next generation. This explains the emphasis on resolution through marriage” (24). Indeed, this conclusion can be found at the end of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, in which the rightful heir ascends the throne and marries, to ensure his line continues. However, Atwood subverts this convention. In attempt to find meaning for his life and his dynasty, Norval seeks out Richard’s help, but Richard hastens Norval’s progress to the Underworld. Richard takes over the business and removes the “& Sons,” from the sign. Seeing his father’s desire for a family dynasty officially effaced, Norval feels there is no longer a purpose to his life, and he kills
himself. Marriage, typically the formula for a happy ending to traditional Gothic or sensation novels, has instead become the basis for terror in Atwood’s Southern Ontario Gothic, as the next generation must seek their own ontological coherence, having inherited none from those who came before.\textsuperscript{15}

As a result, it is no surprise that Laura is lost in her search for her own meaning in life and becomes, in her own way, a \textit{mort-vivant}. During her life, she makes several attempts to commune with the dead, a very Gothic desire. When Laura's mother passes on, Laura becomes afraid of death, but still seeks out the dead in order to gain answers about mortality. She crawls into her mother’s coat, as if fleshing out its shape would allow her mother to return to give her solace (137). Laura also recognizes that there are questions about life which she cannot answer without information from the dead. For example, Laura is quite curious about the omnipresence of God. She seeks answers which are possibly beyond the comprehension of the human mind, but attempts to understand them in the most logical way. She attempts suicide as a young girl by allowing herself to become swept away in the river, sacrificing her life for answers about her mother's death (Atwood, \textit{BA} 151). This image of the drowning, mad and self-destructive girl is, of course, a Gothic trope in itself, seen in William Shakespeare’s Ophelia, from his Gothic tragedy, \textit{Hamlet}. Laura recognizes that it is only through death that she will find the answers she seeks, and therefore shecourts death and appears deathly even in the prime of her life.

\textsuperscript{15} Atwood also subverts the convention by having Aimee not be Richard’s biological daughter, as he believes.
While Norval functions as a *mort-vivant* while still alive, Laura haunts the novel from the point of her death. The opening sentence of the novel directly mentions her supposed suicide. The reader's knowledge of Laura's death precedes the story of it, making Laura appear as a living ghost through Iris's narrations. Iris and the reader discover Laura’s life together, after she has died. After all, Iris did not understand or chose not to understand Laura when she was living. Alan Robinson discusses the times when Iris is clearly ignorant of her sister:

The period in autumn 1934 when Iris has no knowledge of Laura's movements when she is meeting Alex is succeeded by several periods in which Iris loses track of Laura: winter 1934–35 and spring 1935 in Port Ticonderoga; the week in August 1935 when Laura works at Sunnyside amusement park; autumn 1935 to April 1936, when Laura plays truant from school in Toronto; autumn 1936 to February 1937, when Laura briefly attends school again, then does charitable work; her months of incarceration at Bella Vista; the years between her escape from Bella Vista and reappearance in May 1945. (354)

Robinson reasons that Iris's ignorance is caused by her own preoccupations. However, these times also represent when Laura is most herself: when she is not feeling conscripted to her place in society, or by the desire to act like a proper lady. At these times she serves the disenfranchised by working in soup kitchens or hospitals (223, 421), consorts with Alex (198), or finds her own means of success in the world (324). This version of Laura’s life slowly and ironically surfaces as Iris crafts her retrospective after Laura’s death.
While Laura may seem to find more meaning in her life as she ages, she is unable to communicate properly to her sister while they are both alive. Hyttinen highlights the Gothic nature of their miscommunication: “Laura's letters, telegrams, and phone calls never reach Iris because of Richard and Winifred... However, these missing messages are Gothic for yet another reason: they contain the real horrors of Laura's life, which would have been revealed – although perhaps not believed – had they reached their addressee” (379-80). In this way, Richard continues to play the role of the guardian to the Underworld. Instead of permitting entry into the Underworld, he is preventing knowledge from moving from the Underworld to Iris. The important thing to note is that Iris “perhaps [may have] not believed” the horrors of Laura's life, and thus continued in her blindness. Instead, Laura is forced to tell her story when she cannot be interrupted: once she is dead she can only be heard by those wishing to hear her. There are obvious ways in which Laura communicates with Iris after her death that Iris cannot deny. Many critics have pointed to the connection between Laura's message “Tell Iris I'll talk to her later” (Atwood, BA 491) and the school books she leaves behind in Iris's drawer (493). Hilde Staels asserts, “When after Laura’s death, Iris derives from Laura’s notebooks that Richard was ‘besotted’ with her sister and that he raped her, as he did Iris, she realizes: ‘It had been there all along, right before my eyes. How could I have been so blind’”(156). Iris not only fails to acknowledge the relationship between Richard and Laura, she also fails to accept that Laura was not destined to make the same decisions that she herself had made. Laura does not want to settle for a loveless marriage that allows her to maintain her social status. Only once she has been released from the death-like grip of Richard, is
Laura free to share the meaning of her life with her sister, revealing the freedom that can be found from choosing one’s own role within society.

Both Hyttinen and Heiland note the Gothic relationship between the two sisters. Hyttinen comments, “Iris is haunted by Laura for at least two reasons: her guilty conscience and the evasiveness of Laura” (377). However, Hyttinen does not discuss the way in which Iris must acknowledge their similarities in order to know Laura truly. Heiland comes closer to this notion: “Laura functions as an uncanny other to her sister and to others as well, letting that which has been repressed rise to the surface, or, more accurately, never repressing anything at all. It is her refusal to open up that gap between appearance and reality that makes her dangerous, her interest in ‘essences’ above all” (166). Heiland sees this character trait as dangerous; however, the danger in the relationship between Laura and Iris is the involvement of Richard, who prevents their true communication. I see Laura's character as a source of strength for Iris. After all, it is realizing the truth about Laura's life that helps Iris leave Richard, although she could conceivably have left at various other times, such as when her lover offers to help her leave him, if the tale of “The Blind Assassin”16 can be believed (Atwood, BA 361). Iris finds her own place to live and means with which to live, just as Laura had always wanted for herself. Since Iris was unable to listen to Laura’s advice during her life, Laura is forced to show Iris in death the freedom that can come from shunning societal roles and expectations. By revealing the meaning of her life to Iris, Laura is able to give her strength to live the same life, finding the independence she deserves.

16 Following MLA guidelines, the novel, written by Atwood, will be denoted as The Blind Assassin. The novella published under the name of Laura Chase shall be denoted as “The Blind Assassin.”
The ambiguity of the authorship of the “The Blind Assassin” aids in revealing more of Laura's character and the reasons she haunts the novel. Hyttinen comments: “Although the novella serves as a memorial in helping to preserve Laura's name, it simultaneously obscures who Laura was, since readers interpret it as an autobiographical account of Laura’s secret life of romance” (375). The attribution of “The Blind Assassin” to either Iris or to Laura is difficult to make with any certainty. While Iris certainly denies any of Laura’s involvement in the writing process (“As for the book, Laura didn’t write a word of it” [512]), she has already revealed herself to be an unreliable narrator, recounting events that occurred prior to her birth and relying on Reenie as a credible source of information (67). As Reenie has passed away by the time of narration, and as Iris was likely quite young when many of these accounts were passed onto her, these are most likely stories that Iris has constructed for herself, even if they were once based on fact. Naturally, this ambiguity is part of Atwood's intent: while Iris is certain that “The Blind Assassin” is her story, she fails to recognize what she has in common with her sister. Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis notes:

The mute sacrificial maiden of Sakiel-Norn becomes Laura as a six-year-old pushed off the ledge by Iris for believing literally that her mother is with God; later she is Iris herself as she is married off to Richard to save her father's business. Still later she will be Laura again, pushed over the edge into suicide by the blind assassin Iris, whose jealous, unguarded words inform Laura that Alex is dead, and that he was her, Iris's, lover. (354)
Their shared identity as the sacrificial maiden does not reveal they are one and the same, simply that they can learn from each other and can substitute for each other. Laura attempts to show Iris who she truly was in order for Iris to take that strength and use it in her life. While Iris may feel Laura was eccentric in her devotion to working with others, Laura was trying to show Iris she need not be a victim of the social expectations forced on her by her father. Instead, Laura suggests, Iris can and should live her own life and free herself from the Gothic gatekeeper and villain, Richard.

Iris muses towards the end of her narration: “Laura is no longer who you thought she was” (Atwood BA 513). She writes this as an invocation to her granddaughter, who she suspects will have read the entire novel and therefore have realized more information about her family. Her granddaughter undoubtedly would have come across the same realization: Laura is not who Iris believed her to be, either. Laura was not merely a peculiar child for whom Iris was to care. Instead, Laura was a strong willed woman, who did what she felt she had to in order to stand up for her beliefs. She believed the right of people, including herself, was to live freely, rather than according to societal expectations. It is only in death that she is able to exist outside of social roles.

Like her father, Laura becomes prisoner of Southern Ontario and the Underworld. She attempts to create for herself a life outside of the area when she goes to wait for Alex in Halifax. However, Laura continues to be drawn back into the Southern Ontario Underworld. She seeks not simply to find the meaning of her life for her own purposes, but to pass it on to Iris in order that she might free herself from this dark terrain. However, in life, she is unable to connect with Iris – they remain on two different planes.
It comes as no surprise, then, that Laura’s death occurs falling off a bridge. While it is not the “magical means of crossing otherwise uncrossable distances… be it the golden cup of the sun or simply a normal ship with a divinely added wind” of classic mythology (Edmonds 23), the bridge is still a means by which to cross the waters which bound the Underworld. While living, she is unable to reach Iris in the Underworld in order to provide Iris with directions for her journey back to the land of the living. In killing herself, Laura is able to provide Iris the clues she needs in order to escape her entrapment in the role dictated to her by society.

Iris too haunts her own story as a mort-vivant, particularly due to the story’s organization. Like Laura’s, Iris’s haunting is driven by the need to enunciate her life’s meaning. While Laura readily learned her own meaning as she aged, Iris is only able to discern the meaning of her own life as she stands on the precipice of death. Staels correctly asserts that Iris is in the midst of “metaphorically entering her unconscious, yet still afraid of looking beyond the pool or mirror” (157). Without a doubt, this entry could be seen as a journey into the Underworld. Perrakis agrees: “Writing the inner “Blind Assassin” had been Iris's first attempt to negotiate with the dead. She admits having written it originally to keep alive her memories of her lover, Alex. Then she published it under Laura's name both to punish her ex-husband Richard and to keep Laura's name alive” (354). However, there are many other ways in which Iris faces a form of death. If Iris can be believed to be the author of “The Blind Assassin,” then she is also the subject of the memorials devoted to her sister. Following Perrakis's assertion that “The Blind Assassin” was attributed to Laura by Iris as a way to keep her sister's name alive, it
stands to reason that Iris has essentially killed herself in the process, destroying her own posterity. Iris reads the misquoted lines from her story with the attribution to her sister in the stalls of washrooms. She is also cleans up the flowers on her sister's grave, left by her own fans. In a sense, she is like her father in that she is physically there, but part of her spirit has died.

Even prior to the publication of “The Blind Assassin,” Iris metaphorically dies, furthering her own haunting of the novel. Staels notes of the Sakiel-Norn plot, “Alex uses the Demeter-Persephone myth to interpret Iris's experience whereby Iris becomes Persephone, the powerless ‘maiden’ (Kore) who was abducted, raped and held captive by the Hades, the Lord of the Underworld (Richard)” (159). Staels is not the only one who has mentioned that Richard is a menacing character. Hyttinen indicates: “Richard represents the formulaic Gothic villain stereotype of an older, powerful, rich and threatening man” (379). While Hyttinen suggests that Richard is merely a force of oppression that forwards the Gothic plot, Staels more closely links this oppressive force to Iris’s metaphorical death: “Most striking is the repetitive reference to Richard and Laura being ‘noted’ or ‘eminent.’ Iris is largely obliterated in these official reports” (151-2). The traditional argument suggesting that marriage erases the identity of women seemingly holds true. Iris is essentially not present in her marriage, as she signed over her life when she was married. She is not even in charge of her own house: her sister-in-law decorates it for her. The garden, the one area of her life in which she is granted control early in her marriage, does not even bear life: it is a rock garden. However, this death-in-marriage motif is more sinister than simply the erasure of Iris’s identity. Iris is the
payment made to Richard, the guardian of the Underworld, by her father as a sacrifice to save the business. There are various mentions of sacrifice throughout the course of the novel. Mrs. Hillcoate informs Laura that Jesus was sacrificed by God to save the sins of others (Atwood, BA 150). Laura, in turn, tries to sacrifice herself to save her mother (151). Iris even sacrifices her potential fame or notoriety in order to save the name of her Laura, by attributing “The Bind Assassin” to her, allowing her sister’s name to live on after her death. However, Iris’s sacrifice erases her own identity, will and posterity leaving her as nothing more than a ghost.

The first and last sections of *The Blind Assassin* reveal an interesting curation of the order of this novel which further suggests Iris is a *mort-vivant* narrator. Unlike the beginning of other sections clearly narrated by Iris, there are no details to suggest that this section is written by the same Iris. The opening section is entitled: “The Bridge” and details the demise of Laura. Similarly, Section XIII, “Escarpment” presents the same situation. However, in “The Bridge” Iris recounts details as though she has had more time and emotional distance from the story than in “Escarpment.” “Escarpment” deals almost exclusively with the thoughts and reactions of Iris. While she does detail the accident, her report appears only to contain information that the police officer delivering the news would have had: “Laura had gone through a Danger barrier, then right off the St. Clair Avenue bridge into the ravine far below. It was a terrible smash-up, said the policeman, shaking his head sadly. She'd been driving my car: They'd traced the license. At first they'd thought – naturally – that I myself must be the burned woman found in the wreck”
(492). In contrast, the first section details the accident in a first-person narration that nonetheless approximates an omniscient point of view:

Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge. The bridge was being repaired: She went right through the Danger sign. The car fell a hundred feet into the ravine, smashing through the treetops feathery with new leaves, then burst into flames and rolled down into the shallow creek at the bottom. Chunks of the bridge fell on top of it. Nothing much was left of her but charred smitereens. (1)

While “Escarpment” and “The Bridge” contain the same main details, the tone and feeling of these stories are very different. “Escarpment” allows Iris to deal with the situation through the lens of a lady of society. She thinks of plausible excuses for why Laura would have had her car. She changes her outfit into something more practical for the morgue, and she thinks, “I ought to warn Richard, at his office: as soon as the word got out, the corpse flies would besiege him. He was too prominent for things to be otherwise. He would wish to have a statement of grief prepared” (492). Through all of this, the only mention of emotions is a note about the need to suppress them. In contrast, “The Bridge” not only has more subjective detailing of the accident, but also concludes more philosophically in response to the pain Iris is feeling: “But some people can't tell where it hurts. They can't calm down. They can't ever stop howling” (2). Likening people to animals certainly highlights the danger of the inability to enunciate pain. The purpose of Iris’s narration is to attempt to enunciate the pain that Iris feels and that Laura felt.
Given the attention to detail and the philosophical perspective, Iris could be narrating the version found in the first section from beyond the grave.

The first section, which includes “The Bridge,” is unlike the other sections, but is similar to the final section. Not only does it contain a mix of Iris's narrative, “The Blind Assassin” and a newspaper clipping, but it is also more spiritual. The usually harsh Iris has softened. She describes the air as “opalescent,” suggests that the phlox “glimmers” and that the world “smells like youth” (521). These words of beauty, hope and potential sound strange from the woman who has been competing in a race against her body to complete her story, a suggestion that Iris is no longer a mort-vivant trapped in the land of the dead, with all its Gothic darkness. While “The Bridge” starts the opening section of the novel, Iris's narration ends the final section of the novel. In fact, it is placed immediately after Myra Sturgess's memorial of Iris from The Port Ticonderoga Herald and Banner. There is a note of irony in the inclusion of this newspaper clipping. Iris has spent the previous 518 pages attempting to distance herself from her identity as “the sister of noted local authoress.... daughter of Captain Norval Chase... wife of the late Richard E. Griffen... and the sister-in-law of Winifred Griffen Prior” (519) in order to enunciate the meaning of her own life. While these descriptors may be primarily true (with the exception of Laura as the authoress), Iris's desire to reveal herself through this memoir is not reflected in her memorial. However, the significance of the book’s closing strategy is not limited to Atwood’s juxtaposition of the memoir and the memorial, but also includes an important detail regarding ordering. By including the memorial before Iris has finished her narration, Atwood suggests that Iris has passed on before she has finished writing.
The first and last sections of the novel are written, at least by implication, from beyond the grave.

In contrast, Sharon Wilson suggests that the published novel of *The Blind Assassin* may have been arranged by Sabrina or Myra (77). As a result, the ordering of the pages may have been a mistake, or at least may have held no greater purpose. However, the juxtaposition of the newspaper clippings and “The Blind Assassin” within the same sections throughout the novel suggests that the organization of these pieces of history is intentional. Even the very last words suggest that Iris has already crossed into the land of the dead: “But I leave myself in your hands. What choice do I have? By the time you read this last page, that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be” (Atwood BA 521). Not only is Iris's life in the hands of the reader – whether to believe her story or simply the facts as presented by Sabrina or Myra – but also her spirit is contained in the book.

Iris is no longer trapped in the Underworld at the end of the novel. Having been the gift offered to Richard, in a transaction that forces her to cross the waters to enter the Underworld, she has had to listen to the advice of her sister to help her find her way back to the land of the living. With the writing of her tale, she finds a new way to enunciate the meaning of her life and the dynasty of her family so that she can pass her story on to her granddaughter as her inheritance. Having journeyed back from the Underworld, she has moved on to a better place, escaping the Gothic space between life and death. Edmonds argues, “In some cases, mere completion of the journey is insufficient for a happy ending; the traveler who applies the correct solution finds some reward – a pleasant location in
the next world, blissful activities, a happier condition of life” (23), which is indeed the case for Iris. Having returned from the land of the dead, Iris is no longer a mort-vivant. Instead, she can cross into death and begin to have peace.

Gothic fiction frequently deals with death, be it the fear of it, or the fear of returning from it. For the characters of *The Blind Assassin*, the fear is that the dead will not be remembered, that they will have suffered for nothing. They find themselves somewhere between life and death, attempting to derive meaning from a life in order to leave a positive legacy. Norval is unable to achieve this positive legacy, having been unable to find meaning either in life or in death. In contrast, it is only through her death that Laura is able to express the meaning she has found for life. For Iris, it is only in death that she can put the past to rest. Atwood’s version of the Gothic attempts not to generate fear and tension out of typical Gothic binary of life and death but to generate meaning out of the meeting of these conceptual poles. After all, the poorly enunciated life has no meaning, and thus is akin to death.
CHAPTER THREE: TRACING GHOSTS:

THE UNCANNY APPROPRIATION OF HISTORY

Dark deeds and spectral beings have long been part of the Gothic tradition, so it is not surprising that they would play a large role in Margaret Atwood’s oeuvre, given her academic training in eighteenth and nineteenth century literature and personal interest in the genre. However, Atwood’s use of Southern Ontario Gothic has taken these traditional characteristics and altered them to represent the daily threats of the area. The ghosts of Southern Ontario Gothic are spectral re-imaginings of the past which must be confessed in order to be brought to peace. While neither *Lady Oracle*, nor *Cat’s Eye*, nor even *Alias Grace* begins with an outright admission of guilt on the part of the protagonists, the narration that follows is undoubtedly, as Peter Brooks defines confession, “a verbal act of self-recognition as wrongdoer [which] provides the basis of rehabilitation” (2). The protagonists’ awareness not only of their confessional act, but also of the act to which they are confessing, varies in each novel. What remains consistent through these three novels is the fact that the confession is not an attempt on the part of the protagonists to acknowledge *what they have done*, but rather to acknowledge *who they are* by revisiting the past. While they have indeed lived these stories, and thus should find them familiar, their versions of the stories have been altered by time, creating an uncanny “second self,” or ghost, which resides on the boundary between self and other. Indeed, Atwood reveals that these seeming opposites can coexist within one person, through the acceptance of (an)other and also through the repression of the self. Rather than exorcising the ghost, as in traditional Gothic tales, Atwood’s version of Southern Ontario Gothic requires that the
protagonists confess their uncanny self or double and accept this ghostly identity as part of themselves in order to cease to be haunted.

Nathalie Cooke, who has examined confession in Atwood’s oeuvre, suggests that “fictive confessions\(^\text{17}\) are further marked by a metafictional self-consciousness which points to the orchestrated, structured aspect of the confession” (211). However, Cooke’s analysis of Atwood focuses not on “truth itself... but rather [on the] dynamics of truth telling” (208), examining the power structure between the confessants and their audience. Rather than focusing on power, I wish to examine contrition by highlighting the ways in which Atwood’s protagonists are unable to make a true confession. While the confession is traditionally a religious activity, Fred Botting, a noted Gothic scholar, suggests, “In a world which, since the eighteenth century, has become increasingly secular, the absence of a fixed religious framework as well as changing social and political conditions has meant that Gothic writing, and its reception, has undergone significant transformations” (2). This shift of emphasis in Gothic texts from the religious to, as I suggest, the personal is also reflected in a shift from the social to the personal. Unlike other subgenres of Gothicism which describe terrors that can only be surmounted through social change, such as through an adherence to the rightful passage of inheritance in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, or through religious reform in Matthew Gregory Lewis’s *The Monk*, Atwood uses the Southern Ontario Gothic to focus on internal struggles which can only be overcome on a personal level through a contrite confession. The narrative acts of Atwood’s protagonists, I suggest, do not reach full confession. As a result, the characters

\(^{17}\) Cooke uses the term “fictive confession” to denote confessions which are “spoken by a fictional character within a fictional context” (208).
continue to alienate their true selves, and deny the ghosts of their pasts, remaining trapped in the liminal space between self and other, attempting both to confess and to repress the true self.

These ghosts function as uncanny selves, though are not precisely doubles in that they share integral qualities with another person. Rather, the ghost, or “true self”\textsuperscript{18} is uncanny, as, according to Sigmund Freud’s definition, it “is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own” (234). The characters’ true selves become uncanny to their constructed selves. The terror arises from “[s]omething which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through repression.... something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” (241). While traditional representations of the uncanny often describe external terrors, such as the encounter between Laura Fairlie and her eerie double, Anne Catherick, in Wilkie Collins’s \textit{The Woman in White}, Atwood’s terror comes from internal forces. What makes Atwood’s use of these dismembered souls the most provocative is the way in which she has skewed the traditional roles of villain and victim. Rather than allowing her female protagonists to claim the position of victim, placing full blame for villainy on a domineering male character, these protagonists embody both roles. The constructed self

\textsuperscript{18} A comment must be made here in reference to true, as opposed to constructed, identities. Atwood is undoubtedly familiar with the postmodern suspicion of an essential identity, as she presents identity as a construction. However, by allowing her characters to seek out a more authentic identity beyond the socially influenced personas they adopt, Atwood appears to reject the postmodern skepticism of essential self. Her characters' failures to find their true selves are not due to the non-existence of “true selves,” but due to the inability of characters to \textit{recognize} this true self.
is the villain, while the true self, the innocent heroine, is forced into submission. In Atwood’s Gothic tales, that which is scariest is the unrecognized self.

Joan, from *Lady Oracle*, embodies this liminal space between a true and constructed identity as she allows herself to bow to societal expectations that seek to overwrite her identity. Joan attempts, but is unable, to confess that as a child she wished to be a ballerina. While this may appear to be a simple childhood dream, Joan’s sin lies in the fact that she allowed society’s views on the appropriate body proportions – which do not coincide with the proportions of her body – to keep her from achieving her dream. The self who wanted to be a graceful ballerina, but who was not yet aware that she did not have the body for it (Atwood, *LO* 44) is gone: a self not mediated by external pressures. Joan makes her judgmental mother the symbol of society’s scorn, setting the stage for Gothic insurgencies.

Joan’s movement from self to self-effacement occurs when she embraces societal expectations and criticism. While Cooke points to the instability of Joan’s life as the root of the helplessness that leads her to confess (221), I suggest that Joan acts with agency in order to construct a new self. Once she realizes that becoming a dancer is not possible with her body type, she readily embraces her stature. She buys clothes which accentuate her weight – “The brighter the colors, the more rotund the effect, the more certain I was to buy. I wasn’t going to let myself be diminished, neutralized, by a navy-blue polka-dot sack” (Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 89) – and in doing so, she constructs her identity as the antithesis of a dancer. Rosowski remarks that excessive eating allows Joan to “[create] in herself an irrefutable defiance of her mother’s image” (94). She even goes so far as to
seek “clothing of a peculiar and offensive hideousness” (89), creating herself in the image of a Gothic monster. Joan, feeling bullied by society, decides not simply to accept the label of being “fat” but to make it blatantly obvious. However, in the process she has bullied her true self into submission.

As Joan ages, she yet again creates a variety of other selves, becoming increasingly aware of her constructed nature and, as such, her (Gothic) monstrosity. However, she erroneously identifies her purposely rotund self as the true one. As a result, the visions of her true self are mediated by this alternate identity. As Fee notes, “Joan, by wanting the apparently impossible, shows how arbitrary the social conception of what is possible for a woman really is. She wants to be the Fat Lady and a ballet dancer” (54). However, she is embodying this social concept, as she is not allowing herself to embrace her true self and her desire to return to a time before she allowed social conceptions to mediate her ambitions. Joan has become so programmed to view herself as the rebellious daughter that she cannot access the true version of herself – the young girl with aspirations – unless it is mediated by this fat self. Joan is truly trapped in the liminal space between her self and her “other” and she attempts to release herself from this indeterminacy through confession.

Joan’s repressed personal desire comes to haunt her in the form of her ghostly mother. Criticism regarding Joan’s relationship with her mother is abundant. For example, Judith Spector, in “The Fatal Lady in Margaret Atwood’s Lady Oracle,” observes that Joan identifies with her mother, which allows her to have the ability to “‘contain’ her mother as well as the capacity to be the ‘mother’ of her own personality”
(39). However, there has been little work on the spectral aspects of Joan’s mother. The lack of criticism is not surprising: she only surfaces\(^{19}\) three times throughout the novel. Despite this small number of appearances, her spirit highlights the Southern Ontario Gothic examination of the space between self and other: the circumstances under which she arrives are crucial to the examination of Joan’s rewriting of her personal history and to the repression of her uncanny self. The mother has become the symbol of the shame which Joan desires, but is unable, to confess.

Her mother may seem like an unlikely character to mirror Joan’s true self. After all, it is her mother, enacting social judgment, that causes Joan initially to shun her true self. However, Joan’s mother has died and is thus freed from the constraints of social judgment. Joan is able to project her identity onto her mother because they share a number of similarities. Spector argues that Joan’s mother claims that she changed her plans due to an unexpected pregnancy, which creates a common bond between herself and Joan as they both have the “ability to please the ‘prince’” (39). However, it is the loss of these ambitions which they more profoundly share. Her mother yells at her father, “‘It’s not as though I wanted to have her. It’s not as though I wanted to marry you. I had to make the best of a bad job if you ask me’” (LO 78). Her original plans for her life are not revealed, though her desire to shape Joan (67) is likely a desire to give her child that which she has lost. When removed from the context of her relationship with her mother, Joan even has a soft spot for “those who got married too young, who had babies too

\(^{19}\) Atwood frequently deals with the notion of surfacing, most notably within her work *Surfacing*. I have chosen to utilize this word as it efficiently describes the notion of the repressed identity rising up through the constructed identity, suggesting that, in Southern Ontario Gothic, similar to other forms of Gothic literature, it is the return of the repressed which provides the terror in the plot.
early, who wanted princes and castles and ended up with cramped apartments and grudging husbands” (97), who are very much like her mother. Since Joan easily denies her childhood self, it arises as an “other,” in the form of her mother, as they shared the same desires.

Joan’s mother appears at times when Joan is most tempted to take the same path she has taken, that is, when Joan is likely to allow herself to be bent to construct a version of herself influenced by others, and to deny who she truly is. There is a social precedent for this liminal position. As Eleanora Rao suggests, the novel “attempts to understand how women, constantly bombarded with promise of ‘ideals,’ are to cope with fact that those ideals do not actually exist” (142). When a woman strives to attain these ideals, she eradicates her own identity, becoming nothing but a void. The first time that Joan’s mother appears as a ghostly apparition is at the height of Joan’s involvement with Aunt Lou. While their frequent trips to the movies did have the potential to alter Joan’s desire for her future or shape her conception of self, the movies are less threatening than their new religious activities. Aunt Lou takes Joan to a Spiritualist church because Robert “likes [her] to take an interest” (Atwood, LO 113). While Aunt Lou had previously been the paradigm of independent womanhood, she is now constructing herself to suit the interests of her male companion. The spirit of Joan’s mother views this movement away from independence as a potential threat to which Joan may succumb. After all, as the head medium mentions, “She’s telling you... what? She’s very unhappy about something[...]. I had the feeling she’s been trying to contact you for some time. She must have been very concerned about you” (114). Indeed, this scene does contain traditional
Gothic trappings: a message of warning, delivered by a ghostly apparition summoned by a medium. Joan’s mother is trying to warn her not to become the woman her mother and Aunt Lou have become: women who sacrifice themselves for their men. Joan is unable to see this apparition because she has not changed her essential identity, only her physical stature. She has not reached a point in her life where she must surrender to the constructed self, changing her desires to fit the desires of others. There is still a chance she may become the girl she aspired to be.

Joan’s mother’s fear that Joan will construct a new identity causes her to appear a second time—when Joan has started writing and living with Arthur. Rao remarks, “Joan’s stories represent for her a way of enjoying fantasy and reality in close conjunction, something which Arthur could not possibly have accepted” (147). On the one hand, Joan is attempting to acknowledge her fantasies, even if it is through the constructed characters of her work. However, Joan’s behaviour reveals her denial of self. Afraid someone will discover her secret occupation, she locks her Costume Gothic manuscripts in a suitcase (181), an anxious gesture of self-suppression evocative of the secret life of Dr. Jekyll in his locked laboratory. Just as Jekyll has Hyde, his alter-ego, Joan creates one for herself. She relates to Arthur a fictitious past in which she was a waitress and had been a cheerleader. Joan recounts, “and we laughed together over my politically misguided past” (Atwood, LO 181-2). As she becomes accustomed to this life she has created with Arthur, sewing curtains and whistling, her mother appears, crying: her mother’s concern over Joan’s suppressed authenticity has become a reality. Joan has constructed a new version of herself which is more amenable to her new man’s desires. Her mother does not appear
with the usual trappings of a ghost, other than the mention of being “transparent” (184), but perhaps more like an angel “with the white collar; her white gloves, hat and shoes were immaculate” (183). There is certainly no terror in the ghost’s appearance. The terror comes from what her mother represents: Joan’s innocent childhood and true self. Joan presently seems to embody the role of the proper wife by tending to her house, albeit prior to her exchange of vows with Arthur. However, she has gone beyond denying her true self, and has created a reality in which that self never existed.

The final appearance by her mother occurs when Joan is in Italy, having attempted to completely eradicate any semblance of any past identity. She has not only denied her childhood, but also her created self, firmly denying any other identity by physically changing her appearance (332). Just as the villagers recognize her constructed identity, despite her changed appearance, her mother surfaces. It is important to note that this appearance, like the last, highlights the constructed nature even of physical identity:

She was dressed in her trim navy-blue suit with the tight waist and the shoulder pads, and her white hat and gloves. Her face was made up, she’d drawn a bigger mouth around her mouth with lipstick, but the shape of her own mouth showed through. She was crying soundlessly, she pressed her face against the glass like a child, mascara ran from her eyes in black tears. (349)

Joan’s mother achieves the stylish small waist, broad shoulders and made up face popular in her younger days. Atwood’s playfulness with the Gothic genre must be noted here. While she typically has played with Gothic literary traditions, the “black tears” evokes
the modern Goth culture of pale skin accented with darkly lined eyes and clothing, potentially paying homage to the Gothic undead to the contemporary reader. However, like her mother’s make-up, Joan’s constructed identity cannot withstand the pressures of real life and emotion. Mere constructs are fallible when confronted by the authentic, as illustrated by the running mascara which is undone by real emotion. Ultimately, Joan’s true self will surface.

However, Joan does not recognize the truth behind her mother’s appearance. She does not realize that, like her mother, she has trapped her true self beneath these constructs. While her mother’s true self is seeking to get out through her tears, Joan believes the tears are caused by her rejection of her mother. She asks: “could she see I loved her?” (349). While Joan is willing to placate her mother (“I would do what she wanted” [350]), she would only be fabricating another self rather than returning to her true self. Believing that it is her mother who needs rescuing, and not herself (350), she returns to bed unchanged, unable to access the truth through confession. Still haunted in her Gothic environment – “standing on the terrace in [her] torn nightgown, shivering in the wind. It was dark, there was no moon at all” (350) – she allows her true self to remain a repressed memory.

Insofar as Joan believes it is her mother and not herself who needs rescuing, her confession cannot be made complete. She does, however, decide that “it was time for me to stop trying [to please my mother]” (350). While this realization could be seen as a movement towards rejecting society’s desire to shape her, which could allow her to make a true confession, she is provided another opportunity at the end of the novel to make a
confession, which she does not take. Joan is given the opportunity to make a final confession to a reporter seeking to cover the circumstances around Joan’s disappearance and staged murder/suicide. Bromberg suggests, “[l]etting go of her mother may enable Joan to accept her real self, past, present and future... [S]he looks like she may be in danger of making the reporter into yet another mirror for a not entirely true version of herself” (22). Unable to recognize her mother’s true message – that she should believe in her dreams, and not metamorphose to suit the dreams of others – and willing to repeat the pattern with the reporter, Joan will continue to construct her identities.

Joan constructs these alternate selves when outside of Southern Ontario but these selves are brought into conflict with the “real” Joan only when she returns to Toronto. The connection is evidenced by the “rubber band” that Aunt Lou’s medium, Leda, suggests connects astral beings to their physical bodies (Atwood, LO 115). Each time Joan is confronted by her astral mother while outside of Southern Ontario, she receives word that she must return. In each case, the return signals an opportunity for her to accept her essential identity. She must return to Ontario from London, England, for example, upon hearing the news that her mother has died (184). Her mother can no longer personally cause the desire to rebel that Joan attributes to her Fat Lady identity. However, having returned to Toronto, she resumes embodying this version of herself in her daydreams. While in Terremoto, she realizes that she must come home to acquit Sam and Marlene of her murder. Joan will have to reveal the constructed nature of her identity in order to be accountable for the suicide she has staged, which would provide for her an opportunity to embody her true self. However, the novel ends prior to Joan’s last return,
leaving the question of Joan’s identity unresolved. Nevertheless, Joan’s final words of the novel provide the most damning evidence that she will not come to terms with her past and her true identity when she returns home. Rather than acknowledging the damage caused by her multiple identities, she comments: “I don’t think I’ll ever be a very tidy person” (366). Instead of consolidating all of her multiple identities, she will continue to create new versions of herself by denying the old ones. Despite her attempts to deny the true self, she remains trapped in negotiating her identities, continuing to be haunted by the ghost of her past and continuing to reject Southern Ontario as the ground on which such identities might be reconciled.

Elaine Risley in *Cat’s Eye* also furthers the Gothic tradition of the uncanny appropriation of history, which, for Elaine, is a history rooted in Southern Ontario. Elaine’s sin lies in her attempts to repress not only the bullying she suffered, but also the bullying she caused others to suffer. The ghost of her childhood resurfaces in the form of her desire for communion with her childhood friend and enemy, Cordelia. Sonia Gernes examines Atwood’s use of “the mystical apparition of an empowering woman to underscore the damage inflicted on a young psyche by other children who themselves have been damaged by excesses in the patriarchal system” (143). However, she believes that resolution has been found: “As a middle-aged adult, Elaine can rationalize away the mythological forms that the mystic takes, but... Elaine can complete the process of de-mythologizing only when she acknowledges that this power, whether or not it is connected to female deity, resides in herself” (153). Gernes’s position is contrary to my own. I assert that Elaine is still enthralled with Cordelia at the conclusion of the novel.
Stephen Ahern is also uncertain about the resolution. He examines the “pathology of female identity construction in contemporary middle-class Canadian society” (8). However, he concludes: “Whether Elaine’s final forgiveness of her childhood persecutors brings a kind of closure to her story is left unclear” (16). Ahern's view of the conclusion most closely aligns with my study of the novel; however, he has more optimism. I assert that Elaine’s attempt to silence her history enables her only to see her childhood self as an “other” and not recognize that it still forms a part of her identity. Instead, it becomes a ghost which haunts her.

*Cat’s Eye* is a confession to the absent Cordelia, as noted by Cooke (210). Elaine attempts to acknowledge the pain of her childhood, something she had repressed for so long that she can no longer identify it as her own pain: “But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia’s; as they always were” (Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* 564). While Joan’s shame is rooted in her childhood aspirations, Elaine's shame comes from the weakness and pain she felt as a child under the influence of Grace, Carol and, most importantly, Cordelia. Not wanting to face this pain, Elaine has, throughout her life, tried to forget it by denying its existence. Perhaps Osborne says it most powerfully: “Elaine works harder and harder to negate herself” (104) by picturing herself as a black square (Atwood, *CE* 143), fainting to avoid punishment (233), or not acknowledging the existence of that time. When she reflects on the tortures she has faced, such as being essentially buried alive in Cordelia’s backyard hiding-spot, a truly Gothic trope, she says, “I can’t really remember what happened to me while I was in [the hole]. I can’t remember what I really felt. Maybe nothing happened, maybe these emotions I remember
are not the right emotions” (143). She not only erases her identity, she also openly denies any pain she may have felt. Gernes comments, “These out-of-body experiences provide relief, but not empowerment (146). They provide relief because they allow Elaine to forget the trauma of her past, which is nonetheless essential to her identity.

Denying her true identity, Elaine must construct another for herself. Elaine becomes an actress, and she begins to act like Cordelia, mirroring the power she believes Cordelia to have. Elaine first recognizes she has gained some of Cordelia’s power after she has been left to succumb to hypothermia in the ravine and, upon her recovery, is able to break her friend’s spell (252, 260). However, Elaine does not begin to abuse this power (much as Cordelia has done from childhood to high school) until she begins to tell Cordelia she is a vampire twin as they walk through the cemetery (311-2). Unsettling Cordelia with her Gothic fabrication, Elaine remarks: “I’m surprised at how much pleasure this gives me, to know she’s so uneasy, to know I have this much power over her” (312). She has become the Gothic villain, subjugating Cordelia. After having taken this power from Cordelia, reducing her to the victim, Elaine develops a “mean mouth... I have such a mean mouth that I become known for it” (Atwood CE 314). Notably, Elaine does not recognize where the ideas come from – “they’re just there suddenly, like thought balloons with light bulbs in them” (314) – as if they are do not originate in her. She has become disconnected from herself. In fact, she has become Cordelia. To an extent, she is aware of this transposition: “I am afraid of Cordelia. I’m not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I’m afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I’ve forgotten when” (304). Certainly, Freud’s definition of the uncanny double being substituted for
the self is aptly described here. Notably, Elaine “forgets,” revealing yet another attempt to erase her past. Judith McCombs correctly ascertains, “the enthralling Cordelia projects what we later learn is her own shame and vulnerability onto Elaine, until the weaker one loses power, falls, and then regains herself. Midway through the novel, Elaine gets possession of the power that had been Cordelia’s... From then on, Elaine is the stronger one” (16). However, does Elaine necessarily become the stronger one? She still faces moments of weakness, such as those that Osborne observes: “She becomes silent, feels vacant, and upon discovering that she is pregnant, feels once again that she is a black square that is totally empty” (106). As an adult, she effaces any and all emotion of her own, and she is still in thrall to Cordelia, unable to free herself from the villain that was Cordelia, and the villain that she herself had become. All that she can sense is Cordelia’s voice, “echoing in her head, commanding her to conform or entreat her to self-destruct – most dramatically when Elaine slits her wrists with an exacto knife” (Ahern 13). Rather than being two separate people, Cordelia and Elaine each represent a part of Elaine’s personality with Cordelia as the Gothic double, inciting Elaine to violence.

Cordelia becomes the voice Elaine hears when she is faced with situations which place her beyond her sphere of control, when she must face the pain she truly feels. By forcing Cordelia into the position of victim, Elaine says, “I don’t want her to remember any more. I want to protect myself from any further, darker memories of hers, get myself out of here gracefully before something embarrassing happens. She’s balanced on the edge of an artificial hilarity that could topple over at any moment into its opposite, into tears and desperation” (Atwood, CE 348). Notably, Atwood does not specify who would
dissolve into tears and desperation, blurring the line that would distinguish each one from the other. When Cordelia becomes nostalgic for the supposed “fun” of their youth, Elaine comes dangerously close to remembering the time when she was in Cordelia’s position, as the weak friend. As much “hilarity” as Elaine claims to see, it is she who is on the verge of toppling over, if Cordelia forces her to face her own past. It is worth noting the Gothic language Elaine uses to describe Cordelia: “the flesh of her face pasty.... She’s gone back to the too-vivid orange-red lipstick, which turns her yellowish” (344-5). While she may not be willing to admit to it, she recognizes the terror derived from the pattern of victim and victimizer at play in her struggle for power. Indeed, the memory of the past is quite scary to Elaine, even when she pretends the bad memories belong to Cordelia and not herself.

Elaine’s attempt at erasing the pain of her past by placing it on Cordelia also erases Cordelia’s identity. Upon visiting Cordelia in the mental hospital, Elaine comments: “It takes me a minute to recognize Cordelia, because she doesn't look at all the same” (479). While Elaine believes that she “can see how [Cordelia will] be when she's old” (479), there is inevitably a different person whom Elaine hopes to meet. After all, she does say, at the beginning of the book, “There is no one I would ever tell this to, except Cordelia. But which Cordelia? The one I have conjured up, the one with the rolltop boots and the turned-up collar, or the one before, or the one after? There is never only one, of anyone” (6). Elaine correctly ascertains that there is certainly an evolution of self as one ages. However, Elaine is not seeking the present Cordelia. In fact, she is not seeking Cordelia at all, but merely the one she has “conjured up.” The Gothic reference
to witchcraft reveals that she is aware of the deception of constructed selves. Rather, what she is seeking is the childhood, true version of herself. By making a true confession of herself, Elaine will be able to fully come to terms with her past, accepting the trauma of childhood bullying as her own, and be able to move forward. Unfortunately, as she still attempts to find communion with Cordelia, speaking to her on her last journey to her childhood neighbourhood (540) and on the plane at the end of the novel (567), she has not made a full confession. She does not accept her conjured version of Cordelia as part her own true self.

As in *Lady Oracle*, this repression of self is ultimately rooted within both Southern Ontario Gothic as a genre, and Southern Ontario, as a region. Osborne does hint at the importance of the geographic relocation in suggesting that Elaine’s move to British Columbia was necessary “not only to mark the end of her marriage, but also to escape the city of Toronto” (107). For Elaine, Toronto is symbolic of her childhood trauma, and thus of Cordelia. When living in the wilderness, Elaine longs for “[f]riends, friends who will be girls. Girl friends, I know that these exist, having read about them in books, but I’ve never had any girl friends because I’ve never been in one place long enough” (*CE* 35-6). However, as she ages in the city, she “can’t stand to be [in Toronto] much longer. [She] will burst inward” (191). She has not accounted for the social pressures of the city. She wants escape from it and Cordelia. As such, it is not surprising that she flees Toronto for a new start. She has all the illusion of a life there: “I have several women friends, not very close ones.... We avoid each other’s deeper wounds... Jon comes to visit... and we divorce... My parents come as well... My brother Stephen sends postcards. More of my
pictures sell, for higher prices” (511-2). By not forming any close connections, by not expressing any anguish over divorce, nor even any joy over time with family, Elaine seems to be moving through her life without feeling. Not only has she repressed any feeling she may have about the trauma of her past, she has repressed emotion altogether. She is able to feel more content in British Columbia, but she has not resolved the threat of Southern Ontario.

In returning to Toronto, her thoughts return to Cordelia, and soon she is obsessing over her again: “If I were to meet Cordelia again, what would I tell her about myself? The truth or whatever would make me look good? Probably the latter” (7) she says as her first adult reflection on her childhood torment(or). As a child, not knowing physically where Cordelia was triggered anxiety: “biting my fingers, craning my neck, looking for her. Knowing she’s there but not knowing where is the worst thing, she could be anywhere” (172). However, as an adult, she actively seeks out Cordelia, seeing her in the drunk lady's eye (207), and in the Middle Eastern girl outside the scarf store (420). Elaine wants to be in control of the situation when she encounters Cordelia. However, Cordelia’s absence later in the book prevents this confrontation. Feeling abandoned when Cordelia does not arrive at her show (556), Elaine is unable to commune with the childhood self she isolated in order to deny the trauma of her youth. While many critics, such as Arnold Davidson, Osborne, McCombs and Ahern, point to her return to the exact location of the bridge, the site of great trauma, as “Elaine's final forgiveness of her childhood persecutors” (Ahern 16), I am resistant to this theory. She recognizes the shared experience they have: “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 own emotions any more. They are Cordelia's; as they always were” (Atwood CE 564). Rather than owning these emotions and integrating them back into her life as part of her history and a meaningful identity, she projects them back onto Cordelia. While Elaine may recognize Cordelia was as insecure and damaged and she was, Elaine is unwilling to take ownership of her feelings, preferring to send them into the void to wherever Cordelia may be residing.

Elaine still addresses Cordelia as an external other at the end of the novel: “This is what I miss, Cordelia: not something that's gone, but something that will never happen. Two old women giggling over their tea” (567). While it is indeed a mourning for a lost friend, it is also a mourning for a lost self. She is unwilling to reconcile the ghost of her past with the emptiness of her present to have a moment in which her two selves can be integrated. She has accepted a new story of her past, one in which the height of her torture did not occur, and no mystical lady came to rescue her. Instead, she believes: “I know this didn't happen. There was only darkness and silence. Nobody and nothing” (563). Even in denying her traumatic history, she uses Gothic language (“darkness” and “silence”) to suggest there is a terror that still lurks in the silent isolation she experienced in attempting to negate herself by imagining herself in a black box or by being buried in the dirt hole by her friends. She continues to negate her history by trying to silence Cordelia (in the language of Stephen’s childhood games): “You're dead, Cordelia... Yes you are. You're dead. Lie down” (558). By not acknowledging the life she once had, she allows this ghost to remain, despite her attempts to convince herself it does not exist.
While she feels, as she flies home to British Columbia, that she has put Cordelia to rest, her return simply marks yet another stage in her life in which she has repressed the truth of her past, and escaped from the Gothic location of Southern Ontario which houses her ghost. She continues to deny her feelings and herself.

In *Alias Grace*, the Southern Ontario Gothic ghost of the past is much more evident, as is the propensity to confess. In fact, the entire novel is made up of various forms of confession, predominantly those authored, or believed to be authored, by Grace Marks regarding her implication in the murder of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery. However, it is not simply the sin of murder to which Grace is confessing. Rather, her sin lies in allowing others to control her identity. Rather than firmly asserting an identity for herself, she allows others to see her as they wish. Indeed, the confessions that she gives are quite contradictory, focusing more on the audience to whom they are told rather than on what they are telling. These confessions have been examined in a variety of contexts throughout criticism of the novel, whether the critic is examining the novel’s metafictional historiography (Coral Ann Howells, Judith Knelman, Burkhard Neiderhoff), the presence of the mystical (Rosario Arias Doblas, Esther Saxey), the metaphors and motifs of quilting (Migali Cornier Michael), or the nature of corporeal misdeeds (Neiderhoff). Howells' article examines how “history and memory and...Grace's storytelling powers... relate to problems of interpretation: namely the difficulty of ascertaining the truth about the past or of locating a woman's real voice among the conflicting variety of Victorian constructions of Grace Marks as murderess, madwoman, paramour, innocent victim and suffering saint” (30). Niederhoff, who deals with
historiographical metafiction in “How To Do Things With History: Researching Lives in Carol Shields' *Swann* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace,*” examines the return from and the return to death in “The Return of the Dead in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *Alias Grace.*” Saxey examines the way in which “the supernatural functions as a form of liberation” (58). While both Niederhoff and Saxey examine the need for confession to eradicate the presence of ghosts, they do not examine the liminal space between Grace’s self and her constructed identities. I assert that Grace is haunted by Mary because she cannot confess the truth of her past and thus cannot enunciate who she is in the present.

Niederhoff has done a great deal towards making these connections, as he does suggest that “[t]o deal with a ghost according the principles of the Enlightenment requires a full recovery of the secret or repressed knowledge; the ghost can only be laid to rest if the living explore their biographies and their souls, facing up to what they have not been able to acknowledge previously” (“Return of the Dead” 82). Grace's confession and ghostly past differ from these of the other two protagonists. First of all, Grace’s true self is much more obscure than Joan’s or Elaine’s. However, Grace is openly exploring her own confession of her past, fully cognizant of that for which she is searching. Her shame resides not in what she has done, or what has been done to her, but in her unawareness of what has occurred. Grace wishes to expose the truth as to whether she was in fact responsible for the murders of Thomas and Nancy. Given her amnesia relating to the events of the day, she is actively seeking to uncover the questions of the past, as she willingly gives a confession at multiple points throughout the novel. However, none of these confessions points to the truth. For example, the historical “Voluntary Confession
of Grace Marks to Mr. George Walton in the Gaol on the 17th of November, 1843, Star and Transcript, Toronto” is placed in the epigraphs (Atwood, Alias Grace 113, 281, 343, 395). Notably, however, any mention of the actual murder is missing from the “official” confession contained in the epigraphs to the section. And even fictionally, Section IX’s narrative ends with McDermott telling Grace that he would kill Nancy that morning (343). However, Section X begins with Grace and McDermott packing Kinnear’s valuable items while he is lying dead in the cellar (395). Atwood has purposely omitted any details about the actual murder in order to further the suggestion that no one – not even Grace – is certain of her innocence or guilt. As a result, the Gothic threat lies not only in the murderous tendencies that this seemingly innocent girl could harbour, but in the inability of everyone who investigates the matter to know a person truly.

Regardless, this omission of the murder is not very surprising: Grace readily admits “[t]hat is not really my Confession... it was only what the lawyer told me to say, and things made up by the men from the newspapers (120). Knelman examines the false confession of the historical Grace Marks:

Grace's formal “confession,” which was actually a flat denial, was dated 17 November, two days after the commutation of her sentence to life imprisonment was announced in the newspapers.... [A] confession by someone who knows he is about to die and has been primed by a cleric to pray for salvation is surely more reliable than one by someone who faces life imprisonment and hopes for a remission of her sentence. (680)
Knelman's suggestion of rewriting the events for hope of release is notable. Marie-Thérèse Blanc similarly notes: “MacKenzie's strategy required that Grace remain voiceless or, more precisely, that she never be allowed to speak of the events surrounding the murders in her own words” (115). If Grace’s lawyer is encouraging her not to use her own words, the written confession from the jail should not be implicitly trusted. It is simply another identity Grace has been forced to construct, being unable to provide her own.

One reason Grace cannot accept her true self through confession is because she is denied a voice through which to give an honest, unmediated confession; thus she becomes confused as to the correct version of the story: “It would be a great relief to me to know the truth at last” (AG 387). Howells argues that “Grace is a Scheherazade figure, a woman who is telling stories to save her life” (32). Inevitably, the plurality of these stories stems from Grace's assertion that “[w]hen you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion..... It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else” (Atwood CE 359). The various versions of Grace's stories do not seek to tell the truth, but to form a plot which is logical enough to be believed by others, and by herself, and one which will contain the terror, either by naming a killer, or by staving off death.

Whereas Joan and Elaine are unwilling, Grace is unable, to make a full confession, as she has so firmly repressed the identity she nonetheless desires to remember. Grace seems to create a new alias for every time she tells the story. For example, she says, “I used to count [my age] from my birthdays, and then I counted from
my first day in this country, and then from Mary Whitney's last day on earth, and after
that from the day in July when the worst things happened, and after that I counted from
my first day in prison. But now I am counting from the first day I spent in the sewing
room with Dr. Jordan” (115). Each of these events has shaped how she has viewed
herself, and thus, it is not surprising that having a new audience for her confession would
provide a new “birthday” for herself.

But what is this new identity? Since “the day in July when the worst things
happened” and in light of Grace's inability to remember the past, she has been devoid of a
solid identity. As such, she inscribes herself into the identities that others also wish to
write upon her. Doblas argues that Grace “embodies the contradictions that shape
Victorian culture” which include “the angel, the demon, the old maid and the fallen
woman” (92). Indeed, Grace lives within the liminal space between all these
contradictory stereotypes. Knelman also recognizes this trend, noting, “[t]here are not
only gaps but troubling contradictions in the moments that Grace relives. This may be
because her own reconstruction is based less on her recollection of the events in question
than on her recollection of other people's accounts” (683). She reads about herself
constantly. Howells suggests, “Atwood's failure to solve Grace's case through fiction is
surely symptomatic of her views on history, where the truth cannot be known but is
always a question of perspective and a matter of interpretation” (37). It is not surprising
that “Grace appears to have told one story at the inquest, another one at the trial, and,
after her death sentence had been commuted, yet a third” (AG 94-5). In fact, her lawyer
says that “Grace muddied the trail considerably” (454). Grace even acknowledges having
had access to a scrapbook which contains valuable information from the media regarding public opinion of her (32). Migali Cornier Michael succinctly states, “Grace exists only as scraps of texts that when taken together create a representation/approximation of her that is at once underdetermined and overdetermined – there are both empty spaces and too many pieces” (440). Grace is essentially an empty slate upon which everyone projects their vision of her identity. This lack of identity is certainly Gothic and hearkens back to Anne Catherick of Collins’ *Woman in White*: with no paternal history to provide her an identity, Anne Catherick wanders around as a ghost within society. However, Grace has her identity provided for her by others. She notes of Dr. Jordan: “When he writes, I feel as if he is drawing me” (82). She lets her identity be created by those around her, having exiled her true self.

Grace, both consciously and unconsciously, suggests there is an “Other” that possesses her history: “I was suddenly very angry and I screamed I did nothing, I did nothing! It was her. It was her fault!” (38). Grace makes this confession to the matron, who then places her in the Asylum to be studied for insanity, calling upon the Gothic tradition of madness as a source of terror, in a way that recalls Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*. However, whether its teller is sane or not, Grace's story unfolds as a split narrative. Saxey suggests that she “[locates]... Grace Marks in the tradition of the ‘uncanny double’... One aspect of the hero remains socially respectable, the other commits (or urges) terrible acts” (67). Saxey views Mary as an entity separate from but similar to Grace, suggesting Mary is a legitimate ghost. However, I assert she is the repressed voice of Grace's past which has been projected and externalized as Mary, who is powerless to
object, being dead. By allowing the “terrible acts” to be attributed to Mary, Grace can become “socially respectable.” Grace is certainly more manipulative of her double than Saxey suggests. She willingly uses Mary to allow her to inhabit the space between “self” and “other.”

While an uncanny double is characteristic of traditional Gothic forms of fiction, Atwood takes it one step further. Grace creates her own double in order to repress her past. Grace denies memory of the history of the murder, and is able to rationalize it through losing consciousness (much like Elaine), falling “to the floor in a dead faint” (Atwood, *AG* 215). Niederhoff notes:

> Creating an alternative identity and surrounding it with a wall of amnesia are strategies of self-protection to her... If she became aware of Mary Whitney hidden inside her, her mental equilibrium would be in jeopardy – and if her judges had known what she did as Mary Whitney, she would have joined McDermott on the gallows. Her survival and her sanity require that the most important result of the research into her mind remains in the dark. (“How To” 80)

While I agree that Mary is a created identity, I resist Niederhoff’s assertion that Mary Whitney possesses Grace, as opposed to Grace projecting her past onto Mary. After all, the projection of the shame of the past onto an “Other” has already been shown to be a theme through Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* and *Lady Oracle*. Niederhoff’s theory of possession does not account for the murderous tendencies that Grace acknowledges having, even before meeting Mary. She confesses to a wicked thought, “when I had the young ones all
lined up on the dock, with their little bare legs dangling down. I thought, I might just
push one or two of them over, and then there would not be so many to feed, nor so many
clothes to wash” (Atwood, AG 128-9). She also has murderous thoughts about her father:
“I had begun to have thoughts about the iron cooking pot, and how heavy it was; and if it
should happen to drop on him while he was asleep, it could smash his skull open, and kill
him dead, and I would say it was an accident” (155). Indeed, Grace could easily be
placed in the category of Gothic villain. Grace already has a murderous past, in ideation
if not in fact, and thus, it is not necessary for Mary to possess Grace in order to give her
the motivation to kill someone, for she already has a pattern of harbouring resentment
against those she has been forced to serve.

Much like our other Southern Ontario Gothic heroines who project their identities
onto others, Grace projects hers onto Mary. Mary is a suitable identity for Grace to adopt,
as she was sixteen when she passed away (178) – the same age as Grace at the time of the
murders (133). Grace has already been implicated in Mary's own deviant behaviours.

After Mary has died from a botched abortion, Grace recounts: “Mrs. Alderman Parkinson
came, and said, Under my own roof, what a deceitful girl. And she looked straight at me,
although she was talking about Mary” (211). Grace feels as though she is being placed in
the same category as the morally impure Mary. Finally, she also develops an affinity for
mimicking Mary’s phrases: “But he was of no more use – if you'll excuse me, Sir – than
tits on a rooster, as Mary Whitney liked to say” (143). She even admits: “I try to think of
what Mary Whitney would say and sometimes I say it” (18). Since Mary is already
considered a moral deviant, she is an acceptable alter ego onto whom Grace can project the unsavoury details of the past which she does not want to recall.

Despite Grace’s admonition of those who call Jerome DuPont’s revelatory ceremony a séance (481), Atwood is playing into a Gothic trope, highlighting the ominous setting: “DuPont turns the lamp down lower. The air in the room seems to thicken with barely visible smoke. Grace’s features are now in shadow, except for the vitreous gleam of her eyes” (479). While the scene is Gothic visually, it is important to note that once Mary is summoned to speak through Grace, all visual cues are lost. There is little discussion of the appearance of Grace as Mary describes the murders. Rather, she is simply referred to as “the voice”, truly a disembodied soul. In this moment, perhaps what is most terrifying is the fact that the liminal space is removed, with the true self being free to speak and the body being inert.

Grace is supposedly unaware that she has channeled the voice of her repressed past after Du Pont wakens her from her “dream” (488). As such, there would be an inherent risk that her confession must be repeated ad nauseam, as it would never allow her to unearth her shame nor to be judged by a transcendent being. However, her past has been revealed to those who have been judging her, and they have incorporated it into their new identity for her. After all, Grace still remains a blank canvas upon which the public may project their views. She has been exonerated and thus, she must be considered, at least to a degree, innocent, given it was supposedly “Mary” that committed the crime. They now expect Grace to be both herself, as innocent, and Mary, as guilty. As such, Dr. Jordan and Jamie are still able to maintain the sexual thril
viewing her as a deviant (471, 554-5). Instead, she must only repeat her confession in order to reaffirm the identity that her new judge, Jamie, wishes to impart to her, that of the victim (553–4). In the end, her communion with Mary Whitney (and Nancy Montgomery, the victim of the crime Grace cannot remember committing) is sanctioned by the public, thus allowing her to reconnect with her externalized past. However, her unawareness of the true events and thus her true identity forces her to remain trapped in the liminal space between a true and a constructed self.

While Grace does attain a degree more closure than either Joan or Elaine does, her identity and history are equally as geographically bound. She attempts to escape her history when she crosses the border in an attempt to evade capture for the murders. However, she is brought back to Southern Ontario in order to face her past (428). She once again crosses to the United States and is no longer in conflict with her past. As she (and Jamie) are the only people within her community that have any knowledge of the misdeeds of her past, the society around them will not attempt to project any guilt upon her. Having left Southern Ontario, she is able to rest peacefully with her past and present being separate, though coexisting, identities.

However, her geographic relocation is not simply an attempt to escape the history that divides her identity. After all, her divided identity is characteristic of the political atmosphere of Southern Ontario. As Atwood states in “In Search of Alias Grace,” the area “was still reeling from the effects of the 1837 Rebellion, and this influenced both Grace’s life before the murders and her treatment at the hands of the press” (1514). Knelman also explains, “Tory newspapers that disapproved of the rebel politician
William Lyon Mackenzie tended to be against clemency for Grace, while reform papers tended to be more sympathetic to her. Such a ‘split in opinion,’... recurred when the case was dredged up and retried in the newspapers at various times during the nineteenth century (679). While Knelman suggests that this bias in newspaper reporting “does not alter the facts, though it does suggest that they were insufficient” (679), ultimately, it reveals that Grace became the repository for public anxiety about the country’s social and political instability. The dividing of sides, whether “innocent” or “guilty,” or the formation of parties, whether “government” or “rebels,” only breeds discontent, as they do not acknowledge the spaces in which they cross.

Atwood examines doubles in Southern Ontario Gothic not as two people who are the same, but rather as one person who has constructed a superficial persona in order to repress a more authentic, but shameful, version of herself. Building upon the traditional tropes of Gothic fiction, Atwood implies that these uncanny doubles surface as physical and metaphorical ghosts. Atwood asserts that the only means through which these characters – Joan, Elaine and Grace – can cease to be haunted is through confession of their past. Each character undergoes a painful process of retrospection, yet continues to deny the truth of her past. As a result, they are constantly forced to continue their confession until they are willing to admit that they inhabit the liminal space between who they are and who they believe themselves to be. Unable to make a full and contrite confession of their identities, Atwood’s protagonists cannot integrate their two identities, preventing them from silencing the terror of their stories.
Conclusion

Margaret Atwood’s works are replete with binaries whose intersections drive the Gothic terror of her plots. Naturally, binaries commonly occur within traditional Gothic literature. However, Atwood’s works fall within the vein of Southern Ontario Gothic. What differentiates this subgenre from the traditional and other forms of the Gothic is the way in which the binaries are allowed to intertwine. Michael Hurley, the scholar undoubtedly at the forefront of the discussion on Southern Ontario Gothic, examines the way in which, “the realistic and the fantastic blur and invade or break one another’s boundaries” (157). In Southern Ontario Gothic, Hurley suggests, the terror does not simply arise from the meeting of two boundaries, but rather from the mixing of them. Unable to separate seeming opposites, the characters of Southern Ontario Gothic tales become entrapped in the confusion created by these liminal spaces. While Atwood’s stories certainly present the liminal spaces which Hurley asserts form the conventions of the subgenre (particularly, the blurring of civilization and wilderness, descending into the underworld and the doubling of characters), Atwood provides some much needed hope for the characters who inhabit the subgenre. Rather than allowing her characters to remain entrapped in this Gothic labyrinth, she provides her characters the opportunity to incorporate both sides of the binary into themselves, which would allow them to calm the terror of the liminal space. Without true confessions, however, they remain trapped in the terror of their own split identities.

While Southern Ontario Gothic need not be defined solely by its setting, it plays an important role in locating the terror experienced by the characters of Atwood’s work.
Southern Ontario is geographically distinct from other regions of Canada. It has neither the heights of the Rocky Mountains, nor the expansive horizons of the prairies, nor even the barren vastness of the North. It is a very small region in comparison, being closed in by the Canadian Shield to the North and the Great Lakes to the South. The land within this small area is certainly not homogenous. Not only is there a contrast between the waters and rocks forming its boundaries, but there are also distinct differences between the ancient forests and the sprawling cities. As discussed in Chapter One, Atwood blurs the boundaries between these seemingly opposite settings, revealing how society allows only artificial interactions with the wilderness. In *Wilderness Tips*, Atwood’s characters undergo certain societal rites of passage relating to the wilderness, such as owning a family cabin and attending sleep-away camps. While traditionally, the Gothic would suggest that the wilderness is characterized by unbridled terror, the means by which society tempers the characters’ wilderness experiences is what is truly terrifying in Southern Ontario Gothic. Rather than learning the peaceful and respectful ways of the wilderness, characters are provided with artificial understandings of the natural world around them. Atwood ultimately suggests the importance is not in giving preference to one of these two environments, but rather in finding a way to work within the two, embracing the dichotomy of the surroundings. While these stories are presented from the point of view of people who were raised within an urban setting, *Cat’s Eye* provides perspective from those who are not. Elaine, the protagonist, is forced to orient herself in the confusing labyrinth of society after having been raised in the wilderness. By exposing society’s shifting rules, which often run counter to the natural ways of the wilderness,
Atwood reveals the damage that can be inflicted on the psyche when society and
cold wilderness fight for superiority over one another. Rather than suggesting one setting be
esteemed over another, Atwood asserts that the way to avoid this terror and entrapment is
to be able to experience both society and wilderness without the meddling interference of
the other. Unable to remove herself from the battle between society and wilderness,
Elaine retreats from the terror of Southern Ontario, still bearing psychological wounds.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Atwood blends the physical setting with the
regional history in *The Blind Assassin*. Atwood creates a modern and physical incarnation
of the mythical Underworld located in the fictional town of Port Ticonderoga. Not only
are Norval, Iris and Laura on a journey into the land of the dead, but the organization of
the novel calls into question whether the characters themselves are living or dead. While
Atwood frequently plays with time using retrospective narrative strategies in other
novels, she further complicates the course of time in *The Blind Assassin* by including
newspaper articles and excerpts from fictive novellas written, ostensibly, by Laura Chase.
By presenting the novel in a non-chronological format, characters can be dead in one
chapter, but alive in the next. Blurring the boundary between life and death allows
Atwood to examine the importance of finding meaning in life and creating a legacy.

Norval, the patriarch of the Chase family, sets the Gothic plot in motion upon his return
from serving, and being injured, in the Great War. Like many towns in Southern Ontario,
the fictional Port Ticonderoga establishes a monument to stand as a memorial for those
who lost their lives. In contrast to the community’s desire to glorify the victory of The
Great War, Norval wants the memorial to reveal the deep trauma that the battles caused.
Unable to express this trauma to those around him, he becomes lost on a journey to seek out meaning for his life. Having lost his dynasty in the process, he cannot leave anything to assist his daughters on their search for meaning in their own lives. Laura overtly seeks to find information from the dead as a young child, but learns to create her own meaning as she ages. However, she is unable to enunciate this meaning to anyone until after her death, having been prevented from communicating with Iris by Richard, who functions as both the Gothic villain and the guardian of the Underworld. Iris attempts to fulfill her supposed destiny by marrying Richard and behaving as a proper lady of society, removing all essence of self. Iris is only able to recognize that this life is not her destiny once Laura is able to enunciate the purpose of her existence from beyond the grave. Gaining strength from Laura’s example, Iris learns that her destiny is not to remain obliterated in the shadow of her husband and her sister, but to live her own life. By recognizing the need to provide a legacy which continues to live after her death, Iris is able to embrace the blurring of the boundary between life and death without fear.

Atwood’s interest in how history and culture affect the lives of individuals within Southern Ontario is reflected in her examination of the liminal space between self and other, as presented in Chapter 3. The protagonists of Lady Oracle (Joan), Cat’s Eye (Elaine) and Alias Grace (Grace) repress a part of their history that not only causes them great shame but also has shaped their identity. As a result, they create constructed identities which allow them to forget the past. However, their history and true identities surface in the form of ghosts, calling them to confess who they truly are and consolidate their identities. Joan must accept that her dreams of becoming a dancer were ruined by
societal ideals for the dancer’s stature, which do not reflect Joan’s stature. By defining herself initially in opposition to, and later, in agreement with social standards, she eradicates any semblance of the young dancer, only allowing her to surface as a dismembered soul in the form of her mother. Elaine chooses to repress the trauma she suffered as a young girl at the hands of Cordelia because she failed to understand the complex social regulations of the city, having been raised in the bush. Choosing to remember times when she bullied Cordelia, rather than when she was bullied by Cordelia, Elaine intensely desires to seek out her childhood friend in adulthood. While Joan and Elaine deal with historical events specific to their personal lives, Grace’s schism of identity is ultimately rooted in the land and history of Southern Ontario. Atwood mentions that the uprising in Upper Canada unquestionably helped skew the reporting of the historical Grace Marks’s trial coverage. The culture at the time allowed the binaries of “guilty” and “innocent” to become “villain” and “hero” in order to have a means through which to tell a personal version of the history at hand. Indeed, the conclusion of the novel allows both “guilty” and “innocent” or “villain” and “hero” to exist within Grace. By using Mary as a scapegoat for the murder, Grace can maintain the social image of innocence. The Gothic terror of Alias Grace, and indeed of Lady Oracle and Cat’s Eye, is not derived simply from the presence of the spectral, but from the protagonists’ insistence on denying the liminal space between self and other, which continues to entrap them so long as they continue to deny the ghosts of their pasts.

Without a doubt, Atwood has painted Southern Ontario in a bleak and Gothic light. She has upheld the Southern Ontario Gothic convention of presenting liminal
spaces as carceral (Hurley 51), encouraging fear where boundaries are crossed. Though she presents the terror of the land as a daily occurrence, she does not suggest, as Hurley posits, that all is lost. In offering her protagonists the opportunity to accept and acknowledge that binaries need not be mutually exclusive, she provides opportunity for hope within the subgenre.
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