The Gendered Texture of Clothing and Art in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye* (1988) is focused on the distinct differences between boys and girls and how they must present themselves. Texture, in both clothing and art, plays a central role in how the protagonist, Elaine, perceives these gender expectations. She is focused on the textures that differentiate boys and girls clothing and how they reflect her discomfort with this binary. As an adult, Elaine continues to focus on gender and texture through her paintings made with egg tempera. Her chosen medium is free of texture and the gendered connotations of the harsh and soft clothing of her childhood, providing her control over her desired gender expression.

Throughout Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye* (1988), the texture of clothing and art informs the protagonist Elaine's understanding of gender roles. After an early childhood focused on science and exploration, Elaine's sudden interest in clothing and "girl friends" at age eight marks her shift in priorities and her introduction to the performance of femininity (Atwood 30). At the same time, Elaine's perceptions of texture are introduced through her descriptions of the discomfort she feels while wearing feminine clothing. She transitions from a "genderless" upbringing in which her and her brother share clothing and she is physically comfortable to suddenly learning the distinct differences between boys and girls and how they must present themselves. The social expectations of femininity, and their associated textures, are represented as a "formative trauma" throughout the novel as Elaine is repeatedly tormented by her friends Grace, Carol, and Cordelia because of their "constant dissatisfaction with … her clothes, family, behaviour, and body language"

(Bouson 164, Vickroy 131). As an adult, Elaine is haunted by these childhood memories, and paints them using textures that mirror her desire for, and ultimate rejection of, feminine softness. Elaine paints with egg tempera, a technique that was introduced in the Middle Ages and "reflects how modern techniques like those adopted by" her fellow artists "do not hold expressive potential for her" (Vickroy 139). By choosing a medium that is removed from the gendered textures of the harsh and soft clothing of her childhood, Elaine is able to achieve control despite her constant sense of being out of place.

Elaine's early childhood is spent living a nomadic life with her parents and brother in the wilderness of Ontario. They spend the majority of this time living free from any gender expectations, which Atwood communicates through their shared clothing: her father wears "windbreakers, battered gray felt hats, flannel shirts … heavy pants tucked into the tops of woolen work socks," while her mother, with the exception of the felt hats, wears essentially the same clothing (Atwood 37). Like her mother, Elaine wears "pants, baggy at the knees, and a jacket too short in the sleeves" with "a hand-me-down brown and yellow striped jersey of [her] brother's" underneath (29). In fact, "many of [Elaine's] clothes were once his" (29)—clothes that indicate "a childhood filled with the pleasure of movement" (Brown 287). The clothing that Elaine wears during these rootless years is described as comfortable, with limited emphasis on its texture. Furthermore, Elaine's parents encourage play rather than focusing on performances of femininity and masculinity from their children. As Elaine gets older and is introduced to the world of "girls … with their customs," she still holds on to the safe clothing of her younger self that "seem a part of [her], even the ones [she's] outgrown" until she finally gives them away to "thin-looking children in scruffy clothes" (Atwood 52, 87).

Elaine's rejection of the soft, sturdy clothing of her childhood signals the beginning of her attempt to follow traditional gender roles when her family moves to a suburb of Toronto after years of living in "so many places it [is] hard

to remember them" (Atwood 22). In the city, Elaine is introduced to a proper school and "begins her lessons in a different kind of girlhood than she has known" (Brown 288). She immediately learns that "you can't wear pants to school, you have to wear skirts" (Atwood 50) and notices that there are "two grandiose entranceways" to the school, "inscribed in curvy, solemn lettering" with the words "GIRLS and BOYS" (51). After spending her entire life being considered equal to her brother, Elaine wonders how "going in through a door [is] different if you're a boy" (51). These differences become apparent as Elaine spends more time in Toronto with other children and discovers that "boys are not the same" as they used to be: "they smell of grubby flesh, of scalp, but also of leather, from the knee patches on their breeches, and wool, from the breeches themselves" (111). Atwood uses intense sensory images to show how traditional notions of masculinity are solidified in Elaine's memory. She doesn't just remember the enforced segregation between girls and boys—she remembers the smells and textures of boyhood and how different they are from the images of "little girls, 'always clean,' living life differently, dressed in 'pretty dresses and patent-leather shoes with straps'" (Brown 288). By relating clothing directly with these gendered differences through texture, Atwood creates subtle "symbols" whose power "we tend not to notice … because it is so familiar" (Kuhn 2). The boys are always described to be wearing rough clothing in "khaki, or navy-blue or gray, or forest green, colors that don't show the dirt much," which allows them to "work at acting like boys" without restraint (Atwood 111). As a young child, Elaine learns that "dress illuminates body and gender within a cultural context" (Kuhn 2) and that she must dress herself accordingly.

While Elaine has learned to associate girls clothing with femininity, she finds herself constantly uncomfortable wearing it. As with the boys clothing, she observes the distinct textures of Carol and her sister's "matching outfits for Sundays" with "velvet collars" and "round brown velvet hats with an elastic under the chin to hold them on," as well as Carol's "dressing gown, with fuzzy slippers to match"

(Atwood 53). The girls' clothing feature soft elements like velvet that tie directly into their expected feminine traits. The girls are expected to be still and docile and to occupy themselves with activities like "spoolwork," and the delicate clothes they wear limit them to these kinds of activities (110). As Elaine spends more time with Grace and Carol, she notices that she "[begins] to want things [she's] never wanted before: braids, a dressing gown, a purse of [her] own … that there's a whole world of girls and their doings that has been unknown to [her]" (59). She begins to change her ways of thinking and "as time passes, Elaine spends less and less energy arguing with her brother or playing with the microscope in her father's lab and more time with Carol and Grace practicing how to be the right kind of girl" (Brown 289). As she spends more time in the city, Elaine continues to internalize normative notions of gender, especially femininity. However, as much as Elaine "attempts to meet visual cultural standards of 'femininity,'" she also subtly attaches negative connotations to her new way of life (Kuhn 2). Despite her descriptions of the other girls' clothes, Elaine constantly mentions the discomfort her "girl" clothes give her; she describes the textures of her "sleeves [that] bunch up under [her] arms … the white stockings [that] are … even itchier than the brown ones [she wears] to school" (Atwood 104). Her physical discomfort, expressed through the harsh textures of her clothing, matches her emotional discomfort around the other girls who use "aggressive attempts to indoctrinate her into conventional gender and religious practices" (Vickroy 131). Elaine's discomfort indicates that, by "[styling herself] in response to divisive cultural codes," she is performing a "survivalist act" since she is tormented by her peers whenever she strays from traditional gender performances (Kuhn 3).

Elaine's childhood memories from her time in the city stay with her as she ages and come to greatly influence her art. Although the subject matter of her paintings is often symbolic of her childhood distress, "her artistic discipline and culturally inflected imagery mediate trauma and help her decipher defensive fantasies that have perpetuated her

emotional stasis" (Vickroy 130). Thus, the texture and medium of her art are equally important. Egg tempera allows her to create works of art that are quite different from her fellow artists and removed from the textural connotations of the gendered clothing of her childhood. She begins using egg tempera after she rejects oil paints and "their thickness … their look of licked lips, the way they call attention to the brushstrokes of the painter" (Atwood 354). Elaine wants to paint "pictures that seem to exist of their own accord … objects that breathe out light; a luminous flatness," paintings that are free from texture and thus free from the marks of the artist (354). Egg tempera is a method that is "difficult and messy, painstaking, and, at first, heartbreaking" and "consists of dry pigments, water and egg (usually the yolk)" that are combined to create a medium that is notable for its luminosity (Atwood 355, Vickrey 15). Egg tempera is both beautiful and delicate, and takes an enormous amount of energy to render, exactly like the femininity that Elaine is forced to perform as a child with her peers dissecting her very move. She recreates the lengthy practices of her childhood by carefully cooking egg yolks in the same way that she carefully cut out "the small colored figures" from the *Eaton's Catalogues* with Grace and Carol (Atwood 59). However, her use of the medium deemphasizes texture as she attempts to reject the softness expected from feminine clothing and art in order to distance herself from these gender expectations.

While Elaine deemphasizes texture in her art, the three other women in Elaine's first group show, Carolyn, Jody, and Zillah, create works of art that are primarily tactile. Carolyn and Jody's works are meant to shock; much like the artists of the new realism art movement, they believe "that because the world is harsh and ugly, art should reflect its harshness and ugliness" (Vickrey 22). Carolyn exhibits this approach in her use of odd and outrageous (for the time) objects like "condoms stuffed with tampons (un-used)" and provocative messaging (Atwood 378). Jody takes this approach one step further. Her art consists of "store mannequins, sawn apart, the pieces glued back together in disturbing poses" with rough textures added in with elements like "steel wool

stuck on at appropriate places" (379). Zillah's artwork is quite different from Carolyn and Jody's; she creates "*Lintscapes* … from the wads of feltlike fuzz that accumulate on drier filters and can be peeled off in sheets" (379; emphasis in original). These lintscapes are the works of art that Elaine gravitates towards most, because of "their texture, their soft colors" (379). The softness of the lintscapes is juxtaposed with the harshness of Carolyn and Jody's works in the same way that the gendered clothing is in Elaine's memories. Elaine is jealous of Zillah's method, wishing she "had thought of [it] first," a remark that is very similar to her desire to have been raised as a "proper" little girl like Grace and Carol (379). Elaine is once again caught in the middle—not quite soft and feminine but not harsh and masculine either.

Even though Elaine's works of art are not centred on texture like her partners', her paintings are still able to reflect "a strong indictment of society … by using a subtle approach" (Vickrey 22). The effectiveness of Elaine's subtle works of rebellion is proven when the show opens and Elaine is targeted by "some religious nutcase" who first resembles Mrs. Smeath, then Grace (Atwood 386). "The woman who is not Grace hurls [ink], bottle and all, straight at" Elaine's painting *White Gift*, an action that is not repeated on any of the other, considerably more provocative, works in the show (385). Despite the shock of the attack, Elaine and *White Gift* remain relatively untouched; the ink can wash off since the painting "is varnished, and painted on wood" (385). Elaine is pleased with the "spectacle," thinking "at last … [she is] in control" of her gender since she can now survive the rage of female figures like those from her childhood unscathed (385). She continues to ponder how her career will be advanced because "paintings that can get bottles of ink thrown at them, that can inspire such outraged violence, such uproar and display, must have an odd revolutionary power" (386). Although Elaine's paintings are deeply influenced by her childhood trauma and the expectations of performing femininity, "painting offsets her own helplessness, giving her a form of control even if she recreates difficult subject matter" (Vickroy 134).

Texture is subtly mentioned throughout *Cat's Eye* as a reinforcement of the gender roles that are imposed on Elaine. Soft textures are associated with femininity and are viewed in both girls clothing and "'introverted' and 'flimsy'" artwork, while harsh textures are seen in boys clothing and "'abrasive,' 'aggressive,' and 'shrill'" works of art (Atwood 386). Elaine constantly removes herself from these dichotomies, never feeling like she belongs in one or the other. She attempts to present herself like her friends but finds that their dress causes her discomfort. At the same time, she finds that she is becoming less and less "tolerated" by her brother and other boys; alone, she is permitted to read with them, but "as part of a group of girls [she] would not be" (111). The result of this combination is a childhood filled with distress caused by girls who constantly pick apart her every move and ignorance from the boys. Despite the persistence of Elaine's associate of gendered clothing texture with her childhood trauma well into her adulthood, she finds a place for herself somewhere in the middle of the gender expectations she has been forced into. As a result, she harnesses these memories and produces an impressive body of work by subverting the very textures that defined her childhood, filling her art with women who, like herself, are not "the same as everyone else's women" (97).

Works Cited

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