

How far do you agree  
that this is how  
margaret atwood  
uses art in her novel  
essay...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Enigmatic and surreal, Elaine's paintings seem to steadfastly resist categorisation, despite the art world clamouring to attach to them pretentious ideological connotations, and Elaine herself mystified as to their significance. However, as the reader – and the protagonist herself – delves into Elaine's harrowing childhood, it becomes evident that the images are in truth pictorial manifestations of repressed traumas bubbling uncontrollably in her subconscious.

Intensely personal and deeply allegorical, the images fuse actual memories with the psychological associations that these memories exert, creating a blend of the 'real' and the subjective that offers the reader a unique glimpse into the protagonist's psyche, and demonstrates the true pathos of a character unable to exorcise her past. Elaine herself fails to understand the origin of her creative impulses, replying jadedly 'why does anyone do anything?' when quizzed by a journalist as to why she is compelled to paint.

She is also mystified as to the meaning of the objects that she depicts, claiming 'I know that these things must be memories, but they do not have the quality of memories... they arrive detached from any context; they are simply there.' Such self-incomprehension suggests that her art is primarily the cathartic expression of repressed emotions and memories that her conscious, rational self can in no way account for or explain.

Even as a child, Elaine is marked by a keen appreciation for the sensory characteristics of her surroundings, for example recalling vividly and in minute detail the grotesque nature of Mrs Smeath's physical appearance, from her 'sprinkling of hairs around the corners of the mouth' to her 'single

breast that goes all the way across her front and continues down until it joins her waist. ' However, such sensory vision is paradoxically linked with a determination to remain psychologically blind.

Unable to confront the painful emotions caused by her torment at Cordelia's hands, Elaine effectively encloses and represses her psychosomatic pain within the tangible objects around her that she appreciates so keenly, such as the cat's eye marble. This process renders her tragically unable to understand the emotional essentials of her existence, and to unearth consciously the memories bubbling uncontrollably in her subconscious. These tangible entities are thus permeated with deep significance, and serve as corporeal representations of Elaine's repressed anguish.

With the sensory and psychological so deeply and inextricably bound in Elaine's psyche, art is the natural expression and outlet for the protagonist's inner pain. Indeed, Elaine's paintings are best seen as her unconscious mind's attempts to exorcise the repressed memories through the depiction of the corresponding emotive symbols. This makes Elaine's art, as Madeleine MacMurrough-Kavanagh describes, a ' repository for the charged emblems of her trauma. It can also be claimed that Elaine is drawn to painting as it allows her to communicate non-verbally, her reticence regarding words stemming from the manner in which Cordelia censured her every articulation.

The notion that Elaine's creative urge is kindled by a psychological need to somehow release and express the repressed memories simmering in her psyche corresponds with the Freudian view, which treats creativity as a

privileged form of neurosis. In the theory of pathography, Freud claimed that art should be seen as a means of giving expression to various psychic pressures, and this idea is evidently applicable to Elaine's paintings.

Yet it could also be argued that Atwood distorts Freudian theory somewhat, as contrary to the traditional Freudian emphasis upon the repression of infantile sexual complexes, Elaine's paintings express repressed memories formed during later childhood, and which are in no way connected to parental relationships. Atwood herself admits that she in many ways challenged the Freudian notion that female childhood was an unimportant formative factor, and wished to emphasise the complexity and influence of early friendships.

Whilst Atwood highlights Elaine's irrational compulsion to paint, a full analysis of the extent to which repressed memories permeate the protagonist's art evidently necessitates an examination of the content of the paintings. The evident irony in this is that the reader can never witness them directly, and must view them through the descriptions of the narrator herself. MacMurrough-Kavanagh claims that 'the paintings are, literally, 'word-pictures': words lead the reader to 'see' the paintings, to imagine what they look like.

Atwood creates these 'word-pictures' very skilfully, describing exactly the subject, colours, and texture used, yet never explains their significance, leaving the reader instead to interpret them in the light of Elaine's experience. Atwood makes Elaine's paintings enigmatic, multifaceted and deeply allegorical, blurring lines between truth and fiction, between actual

images and occurrences and the psychological associations that these exert. The paintings are suffused in images corresponding to events recorded in the retrospective narrative, yet these events are distorted, combined, psychologically loaded.

For example, the initial paintings in which Elaine begins to unearth the recesses of her subconscious are ostensibly still lifes, depicting objects from the 1940s. Yet an examination reveals the significance of these works - in *Toaster* 'one of the doors is partly open, revealing the red hot grill within,' whilst *Wringer* is inextricable with Elaine's hatred of Mrs. Smeath, as in childhood Elaine 'had a brief intense image of Mrs. Smeath going through the flesh coloured wringer of my mother's washing machine.' Even these seemingly innocent, neutral objects are therefore loaded with the trauma of Elaine's experience.

The association with events in the retrospective narrative becomes more pronounced as Elaine continues to paint, culminating in *Unified Field Theory*, Elaine's seminal work painted in the light of a more complete self-knowledge. The imagery that Elaine develops through her paintings not only corresponds to the numerous metaphors and symbols that she creates in her childhood, but links them, forming networks that reveal the underlying concerns of the protagonist's subconscious.

MacMurrough-Kavanagh points to an interesting parallel, claiming that the cat's eye marble, an 'externalised image of goodness, has been contrasted with Mrs. Smeath's internalised 'bad heart' throughout the narrative,' and the two metaphors may ultimately represent the conflicting instincts in

Elaine's psyche. Mrs. Smeth has supplanted her daughter in the protagonist's subconscious as an image of malicious, bigoted fundamentalist righteousness, and her 'heart of a dying turtle: reptilian, dark red, diseased,' whose endorsement of the bullying was Elaine's final rejection and caused Elaine to feel intense hatred, may represent the feelings of shame, inadequacy and hatred that fuelled Elaine's destructive tendencies, marked by her propensity for self-harm and attempt at suicide.

The cat's eye marble, however, is symbolic of the converse; protective, the embodiment of a small child's will to survive. It becomes synonymous with Elaine's inner strength, which allows her to survive the ordeal in the ravine; walk away from Cordelia, and eventually to remember, understand, and lay her past to rest. The talisman occurs numerous times, and is eventually shown to be stronger than the 'bad heart.'

Firstly, the model in Life Drawing, who represents Elaine herself, has a head which is 'a sphere of bluish glass,' implying that the cat's eye marble is the essence of Elaine, not the bad heart imparted upon her by the actions of Mrs. Smeth and Cordelia. In Three Muses the figures whom helped Elaine in childhood all hold spherical objects resembling the marble, representing their protective roles. It is appropriate that in Elaine's final painting, Unified Field Theory, the protective talisman is held near the heart of the Virgin Mary, who is also inextricably bound in Elaine's psyche with notions of protection and survival.

Elaine attempts to paint her many times, trying to embody the image that she believed ensured her survival in the ravine. The Virgin is depicted as a

lioness, ' fierce, alert to danger, wild,' and also as a typical mother of the 1940s, ' wearing a winter coat over her blue robe... carrying two brown paper bags full of groceries. ' In this sense, a comparison is drawn between her and Elaine's mother, who in *Pressure Cooker* is shown to dematerialise, become insubstantial, almost certainly as a result of her failure to support Elaine through the bullying.

The metaphors of heart and cat's eye are effectively twinned, and twinship itself is an allegory within Elaine's art. *Half A Face*, the only picture of Cordelia, demonstrates the inextricability of Elaine and her enigmatic nemesis. Another face is behind Cordelia's, draped in a white cloth, whilst Cordelia herself is ' tentative, hesitant, reproachful-' a mirror of all Elaine's childhood emotions. The title also implies that the women are somehow indistinguishable, with the constituent parts of both ' Elaine' and ' Cordelia' needed to create a cohesive whole.

Metamorphosis is another key theme found in the protagonist's art. Elaine's mother transmutes twice in her daughter's psyche, first slowly dissolving ' from real life into a Babylonian bas-relief shadow,' and later rematerializing ' out of the white pipe-cleaner into the solid light of day,' as Elaine forgives her mother for her failure to intervene in the bullying.

In a fashion, Mrs. Smeath also undergoes metamorphosis in the paintings, from the embodiment of a ' small-town threadbare decency... ncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty,' as Elaine eventually admits that she was, to a figure of grotesque horror, her face peeling off in *Leprosy* and combining with Miss Lumley's bloomers in a ' frightening symbiosis. ' Elaine

also partly ascribes her difficulty in painting *Half a Face* to the fact that ‘ it was hard to fix Cordelia in one time, at one age,’ demonstrating to what extent Cordelia is enigmatic, ephemeral, and metamorphoses throughout the novel.

Yet the ability to metamorphose fully is questioned, with *Cat’s Eye* finally showing to what extent the adult Elaine, despite the physical changes that she has undergone, is governed by the events of her childhood depicted in the background, and by the actions of the three small figures with ‘ their faces shadowed, against a field of snow. ‘ *Deadly nightshade*, as depicted in the painting of the same name, is deeply symbolic, evoking for Elaine her experience of live burial at the hands of the “ poisonous” Cordelia.

The leaves, Elaine admits in the narrative, are ‘ rich, mesmerizing, desolating, infused with grief. Connected to the nightshade is the theme of darkness, present in *Unified Field Theory* in the night sky, which shows the universe’s ‘ darkness,’ and in the beetles and small roots of the ‘ underside of the ground. ‘ Yet the sky is also ‘ incandescent,’ filled with ‘ star upon star, red, blue, yellow, and white, swirling nebulae, galaxy upon galaxy,’ and thus the darkness is permeated with light, creating another dichotomy which echoes the earlier metaphors of heart and cat’s eye to show the two forces operating in Elaine’s psyche.

It is important to note that the metaphors are mutually reinforcing, working together to create rich, visual and psychological depictions of Elaine’s experience. The effect of the dominant metaphors is heightened through the inclusion of other details relating to Elaine’s childhood. The final five



paintings especially, composed after the return of Elaine's repressed memories, offer a cornucopia of metaphors and images, creating what MacMurrough-Kavanagh terms a ' pictorial autobiography. '

The figural narrative created by the paintings is an important counterpart to the autobiographical tale. In revealing the recesses of the protagonist's subconscious, the paintings add a greater symbolic dimension to Elaine's story. MacMurrough-Kavanagh claims that the paintings are ' a ' sub-version' of the discursive narrative as Elaine's story is reconstructed in alternative and mutually completing forms. ' In refusing to explain the meaning of Elaine's paintings, Atwood invites the reader to examine their significance in the light of the protagonist's experiences.

The novel is a Ki?? stlerroman tracing the development of an artist, and therefore in order to fully understand Elaine, analysis of her life and her art must be combined, synthesised. Again, a Freudian-influenced view of art is dominant. Freud argued that psychological analysis of a picture against the biographical details of the painter could reveal the inner conflicts that motivated the artist. In Freudian terms, therefore, art is meaningless without knowledge of events that shaped the artist's life, but when these are provided it can reveal key insights into the artist's psychological motives.

The art and the life of the artist are mutually reinforcing, and must thus be examined together in order to provide a full representation of the artist's psyche. The irony in ' Cat's Eye' is that it is the protagonist herself who must finally undergo this seminal process upon her return to Toronto for her retrospective. For years fundamentally unable to understand what compelled

her to paint and from where her isolated images sprung, Elaine must at the end of the novel re-evaluate her work in the light of a more complete self-knowledge.

When unaware of the events that had occurred in her two-year gap in memory, Elaine criticised her work as simply pictorial, once calling her paintings 'too decorative, too merely pretty.' Only when she finally understands the psychological factors involved, the repressed memories that motivated her to paint such objects does she perceive that her art is deeply allegorical and imbued with multifaceted symbolic meaning.

After comprehending to what extent her creativity was governed by the repressed memories that dominated and chained her for forty years, Elaine feels no attraction or pride in her paintings, merely saying 'Whatever energy they have come out of me. I'm what's left over,' and feels tempted to destroy her work. However, although her critical examination of her paintings imbues her with a deep sense of how much of her life has been lost, it is also a crucial step in achieving self-understanding, and ultimately forgiveness.

At the retrospective, Elaine finally looks upon her images of Mrs Smeath unblended by repressed hatred, and reaches a more objective understanding and forgiveness, saying 'I used to think that these were self-righteous eyes, piggy and smug inside their wire frames; and they are. But they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty. They eyes of someone for whom God was a sadistic old man.' Upon finally

understanding why she created them, Elaine's vivid paintings ultimately enable her to understand, and consequently forgive.

Throughout the latter part of the retrospective narrative, Atwood also employs art for another purpose, contrasting Elaine's unequivocally psychological paintings with the art of her contemporaries. Not all the art mentioned in the novel is cathartic, and two other distinct motivations for artistry emerge. Jon's 'pure painting' exemplifies the idea of creativity for its own sake, whilst Elaine's feminist contemporaries engage in propagandist, confrontational art, designed as an affront to the patriarchal ideology of the establishment.

Elaine herself feels incongruous with the art world. Although admitting, 'I feel I should admire these paintings, because I'm incapable of painting that way myself,' Elaine secretly dislikes the majority of Jon's work, and her sardonic, barbed comments in the narrative (of Jon's abstract paintings she remarks 'I've seen things like this beside the highway, when something's been run over') reflect a bemusement with the innovative techniques practised by the new cohort of conceptual artists.

Likewise, Elaine's relationship with her feminist contemporaries is largely ambivalent, corresponding to her attitude towards the ideology as a whole. She is slightly envious of the zest and enthusiasm of the women with whom she exhibits, claiming that their art 'yells defiance,' and evidently derives a certain sense of pride from the hostility of reactionaries, saying 'paintings that can get bottles of ink thrown at them... must have an odd revolutionary power.'

Yet Elaine's internalised suspicion and hostility towards women, derived from her traumatic experiences at their hands, combined with her natural understanding of – and sympathy for – men, render her unable to fully subscribe to a movement based around female solidarity. She admits ' I know I am unorthodox, hopelessly heterosexual, a mother, quisling and secret wimp.... I am like someone watching from the sidelines, waving a cowardly handkerchief, as the troops go boyishly off to war. ' Such references to Elaine's contemporaries serve myriad purposes.

Firstly, Elaine's failure to conform to the varying artistic trends and ideologies that surround her throughout the decades remind the reader of her fundamental isolation. The contrast between Elaine and the context in which she works is highlighted, and reinforces the reader's perception of the psychological nature of Elaine's art; unaffected by different decades and trends but driven by complex emotions that the protagonist cannot understand. Whilst simultaneously using the art world to illustrate Elaine's character, Atwood uses her protagonist's isolation to expose and satirise the pretentiousness of the art world.

The author seems to an extent to support Elaine's judgment that ' respectable people do not become painters: only overblown, pretentious, theatrical people,' peppering the latter part of the retrospective narrative with figures comic in their posturing. Elaine's first husband Jon is almost a personification of artistic pretentiousness, slavishly following every trend. Initially committed to ' pure painting' in the abstract impressionist style, Jon echoes fashionable tenets prioritising the ' spontaneous energy' of the artistic process, and treats with derision any art he perceives as ' illustration. <https://assignbuster.com/how-far-do-you-agree-that-this-is-how-margaret-atwood-uses-art-in-her-novel-essay-sample/>

However, his artistic principles change frequently and rapidly as he switches allegiance to firstly geometric minimalism, later to the newly- fashionable pop art, talking pretentiously of ‘ the necessity of using common cultural system to reflect the iconic banality of our times,’ and still later to assemblage, fabricating bizarre constructions, one of which resembles a mould-covered loaf of bread. These frequent changes of artistic direction in line with prevailing trends expose an artist with little real creativity, content only when parroting fashionable tenets and ideologies.

Critics such as Charna and Andrea, who with fervour ascribe preposterous intellectual meanings to Elaine’s work, are also relentlessly satirised. Such categorisations are ironically humorous, with the ‘ double-triptych’ depicting Elaine’s mother explained as ‘ a stereotyping of women in negative and trivial domestic roles. ‘ The feminist categorization of Elaine’s art is actually highly ironic, given that her paintings are ultimately psychological expressions of memories of victimisation at the hands of girls and women.

The reader will wince as Jody reassures Elaine that the grotesques of Mrs Smeath merit exhibition, maintaining that ‘ It’s good to see the aging female body treated with compassion, for a change. ‘ Just as Elaine finds such affectation and pomposity from critics amusing, saying ironically, ‘ if I hold my breath and squint, I can see where she gets that,’ the reader will respond to Atwood’s mocking and highly ironic portrayal of artistic pretentiousness.

Yet it is important to note that Elaine’s veneer of stability is dependent upon the misinterpretation of her work, her psyche being too frail to consent to honest criticism of her emotionally loaded, intensely personal work. The

ideological posturing of the art world allows Elaine to be misunderstood, and this she both relishes and indeed relies upon. Despite affectionately parodying the art world, Atwood stops short of asserting that Elaine's work is intrinsically more valuable than that of other artists.

Elaine's paintings are shown to be embodiments of her soul, her subconscious, and the protagonist admits that 'whatever energy they have came out of me. I'm what's left over. ' They are allegorical, symbolic, distorted images of a past reality, but this psychological value must be countered against the social value of the feminists' provocative art and the cultural significance of the innovative ideas Jon and other abstract artists pioneered. Art' is elusive, complex and misunderstood, and thus Atwood ultimately rejects any 'hard, legitimate judgment. '

Acutely allegorical and almost universally misunderstood by the artistic circle, Elaine's art cannot be seen but as a manifestation of the repressed traumas festering in the protagonist's psyche. Only when armed with an understanding of Elaine's harrowing childhood ordeal can the reader - and Elaine herself - perceive honestly and judiciously the significance of what Elaine has created.

Yet just as the paintings are illuminated by awareness of Elaine's suffering, so analysis of the art itself is essential in fully appreciating the scars left upon Elaine's disfigured subconscious. The images illustrate the pathos of a character submerged in her past, but ultimately act as the 'echoes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing,' which help Elaine to finally regain her vision and confront her history.