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Margaret Atwood's

The Robber Bride:

a Feminist Interpretation of a Fairy Tale.

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Travail de maturité

J'ai choisi d'écrire mon travail de maturité en anglais sur le thème de « Margaret Atwood et le féminisme ». Ce thème m'a mené à étudier un livre particulier, *The Robber Bride*, que j'ai analysé sous divers points de vue. Le premier de ces points de vue est celui du féminisme dont la présence est constante dans cet ouvrage. Je me suis ensuite penchée assez longuement sur le conte qui est à la base de ce livre. Les contes ont toujours été très importants pour Margaret Atwood. Elle utilise ici le conte de Grimm intitulé *Le Fiancé Brigand*. Parmi les autres objets d'analyse, j'ai choisi d'étudier les personnages et les relations qu'ils entretiennent les uns avec les autres. Je me suis également demandée si les idées présentées dans cet ouvrage sont celles de l'auteur ou seulement celles de ses personnages.

Ce livre raconte comment trois amies d'âge moyen mangent tranquillement ensemble dans un restaurant. Tout à coup une femme dont elles ont célébré l'enterrement quelques années auparavant entre dans le restaurant, bien vivante. Cette femme, Zenia, a bouleversé la vie de chacune d'elles, en se disant leur amie, puis en décampant avec le partenaire de chacune d'elles. Son retour rend les trois amies terriblement angoissées et leur rappelle tout leur passé douloureux, qu'elles présentent dans cet ouvrage.

Les trois amies ont des caractères très différents et chacune a une manière très différente de concevoir la vie. Mais elles se fondent ensemble, forment un bloc fort et uni et réussissent ainsi à vaincre leur ennemie, Zenia.

Cet ouvrage laisse beaucoup de questions ouvertes pour le lecteur. C'est, en effet, un écrit très fort qui pose énormément de questions sur la vie et plus particulièrement sur les relations entre hommes et femmes.

Introduction

This essay is an analysis of *The Robber Bride* by Margaret Atwood, locating and highlighting the main themes, such as the feminist transformation of an existing fairy-tale and the ideas and opinions of four very different female characters. These four women are immensely important as the whole book is based on their relationship with one another and their respective ideas. I have therefore analysed the novel taking the female characters as a starting point, as well as always considering another dominant feature: feminism. After having done a certain amount of research on feminism, I realised that it was not such an easy concept as I had first thought. The movement itself is extremely complex, as in fact nobody has yet absolutely agreed as to its real definition. Because the feminist movement was, and is composed of many different - even conflicting - themes, it is rather difficult to summarise. I have decided instead to explain the concept from my own personal view-point.

My opinion is far from being extreme. In some instances, feminism is not so much a struggle for equality between the sexes as an attempt to prove the superiority of women. Perhaps feminists think that in order to achieve equality we must first recognise the superiority of women. But is this wish to be superior not exactly what men are shown to be doing? Why put up a big fight, only to find oneself in the same situation as before but with the roles reversed? That is what some feminist women are trying to do, and I totally disagree with this chain of thought, because it seems really unfair and stupid merely to treat men as they have treated women. One could almost say that, insofar as women resist the desire to be considered superior, they are not repeating men's mistakes and so are in a way superior! The aim in all this is to have a happier world where people get along well with each other - so why make women more important?

What one should aim for is that both sexes be equal and regard each other as such. I feel that the steps to be taken at this point of the struggle should be taken by each person, individually. Everybody, regardless of gender, should try to consider others as equal. Feminists usually say that the equality problem lies only with men. But I think that both sexes have difficulties with this question. For example, many women say that they like macho men - so then, why complain if they are unfaithful and consider women as dollies? In addition, most women think that having children means remaining at home while their children are babies. Why not have a fifty-fifty arrangement, so that the father also looks after the baby? Another problem results from stereotypes, which are accepted

by many women too. I believe that women's mentality must also change, so that equality can really be respected and accepted by both sexes. Many questions need to be solved in this struggle for equality. The most important things like the vote for women and recognition for their intelligence and physical capacities have more or less been achieved now. I think that what one needs at the moment is greater mutual comprehension so that we finally achieve total equality.

Margaret Atwood and Feminism

The Canadian author, Margaret Atwood, was born in Ottawa in 1939. She has written some poetry and many novels. She has won several awards for her writing, thus gaining international acclaim. Her novels are seen as very feminist although her style is very individual. I find Margaret Atwood a really fascinating person. I have read a few of her novels and find them not only extremely engrossing, but also very well crafted. Her manner of writing is very personal and the way in which she successfully presents each character as if she really *were* him or her is most astonishing. This also makes her language, expressions and ideas vary enormously, as each character is unique.

Margaret Atwood wrote a personal presentation of her novel, which I find very interesting because she expresses her way of seeing her creation:

"[...] it's from Grimm's that I've derived the title of my [...] novel, *The Robber Bride*.

In the original story, it's "The Robber Bridegroom" - a tale of a wicked maiden-devouring monster - so why did I change it? Well, I was sitting around one day thinking to myself, Where have all the Lady Macbeths gone? Gone to Ophelias, every one, leaving the devilish tour-de-force parts to be played by bass-baritones. Or, to put it another way: If all women are well behaved by nature - or if we aren't allowed to say otherwise for fear of being accused of antifemaleism - then they are deprived of moral choice, and there isn't much left for them to do in books except run away a lot. Or, to put it another way: Equality means equally bad as well as equally good.

[...] *The Robber Bride* is a book with a villainess in it. What kind of villainess? Well, to begin with, a villainess who knows how to make an entrance. On October 23 [...] three women friends ["of a certain age"] are having lunch in a Toronto restaurant called The Toxique. [...] The first one is an ambidextrous military historian, whose speciality is siege techniques of the Middle Ages. The second one has psychic leanings, a complex past, and a good reason for never eating pigs. The third one is a business wheeler and dealer with gambling tendencies. When they have reached the dessert, [...] in comes a fourth woman, whose funeral service all three of the others attended five years before.

This returnee - who, due to the wonders of modern plastic surgery, is very well preserved - did awful things to the first woman in the sixties, awfuller things to the second one in the seventies, and the awfulest things of all to the third one in the eighties. In a novelistic structure based on nineteenth-century symphonies with leitmotifs, Russian dolls-within-dolls, [...] we learn about the various awful things. Then we return to the present to find out what happens next. [...] there are awful things. Well, why not? Life contains awful things. By the time you've reached a certain age, you notice."

(Reading Group Guide - THE ROBBER BRIDE by Margaret Atwood)

Many readers probably think that, in her novels, Margaret Atwood expresses her personal point of view. Reading *The Robber Bride*, one might then be shocked (and justly!) to think that she is such an extreme feminist, depicting men as feeble, unfaithful and dependent! If the reader imagines that Margaret Atwood actually believes that only homosexuals are reliable, decent and normal, then he or she might automatically think that there is something wrong with her ideas!

After reading several of her articles and interviews, none of which showed such an extreme point of view, I came to the conclusion that she is indeed a feminist but that the ideas she expresses in her novel are not automatically what she thinks. Thus, she is not necessarily quite so bitter and disillusioned as Roz, who considers that only Boyce, her

homosexual assistant, can be depended on. Margaret Atwood depicts here something rather exaggerated, which reflects the strength of feminism at that time, not her personal opinion. If every reader thinks that in such and such a book, the author is portraying himself or herself, then an existentialist problem arises for Margaret Atwood: she has written many novels, each including different characters. How would it be possible that she *be* all these at the same time? It is rather unkind of the reader to automatically think that there is some form of autobiography in a novel. Each character has of course an autobiographical side and all writing comes from some previous personal experience. However, it would be wrong to extrapolate that Margaret Atwood is Roz, Tony, Charis and Zenia!

In the hope of discovering whether the ideas expressed in the novel are indeed the author's, and whether her way of writing is "autobiographical" or not, I read the book *Margaret Atwood Conversations*. I thereupon came across a passage which appeared relevant, because the author herself confirms my theory that Margaret Atwood's characters do not embody her position, ideas or feminist points of view.

"I think [this confusion between a novel and an autobiography] is the result of several factors. First, it may be a tribute to the writing. The book convinces the reader, therefore it must be "true", and who is it more likely to be "true" about than the author? Readers sometimes feel cheated when I tell them that a book is not "autobiographical" that is, the events described did not happen to me. (Of course, every book is "autobiographical" in that the images and characters have passed through the author's head and in that he or she has selected them.) [...] The writer is seen as "expressing" herself; therefore, her books must be autobiographical. [...] the idea is remarkably tenacious. I was talking about this at a reading one time. I explained that my work was not autobiographical, that the central character was not "me" and so on. Then I read a chapter from *Lady Oracle*, the chapter in which the fat little girl attends dancing school. The first question after the reading was over was, "How did you manage to lose so much weight?" (Ingersoll: 71-72)

Margaret Atwood affirms that she does not describe herself in her novels. Consequently, she is not her characters, and what comes out of their mouths is not necessarily her own ideas. Margaret Atwood does not admit that she *hates* the unflattering fact that many think her books autobiographical, but she does seem rather annoyed: as if a good author were incapable of imagination and invention! (a rather disparaging view!) In conclusion, Margaret Atwood is indeed a feminist, but not such an extreme one as her novel may lead us to believe. If her plots introduce exaggerated situations, it is probably to force a feminist reaction in the reader.

A Feminist Twist to a Fairy Tale

The author took the title "*The Robber Bride*" from the Grimm fairy-tale entitled "*The Robber Bridegroom*." As a child she was very taken by these stories, having been given the complete and unabridged Grimm's *Fairy Tales* at the age of six. She says she especially loved the book because of the transformations some of the characters underwent. In an interview, Margaret Atwood says that another interesting aspect in it, for her is that

"unlike the heroines of the more conventional and re-done stories, such as *Cinderella*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*, the heroines of [the stories in Grimm's *Fairy Tales*] show considerable wit and resourcefulness and usually win, not just by being pretty virtuous, but by using their brains. And there are wicked wizards as well as wicked witches." (Ingersoll: 71)

She continues: "I would like to write about this sometime," thus showing what a big impact these fairy-tales have had on her. And this proves Bruno Bettelheim right, who, in his book *The Uses of Enchantment*, highlights the huge and helpful impact of fairy-tales on children, provided they read unexpurgated versions.

Talking about Grimm, Margaret Atwood says that:

"one of the interesting things was that there were a lot of quite active female characters, whereas if you get the watered-down version, you just get Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty. [...] the stepmother is bad, but there are active princesses. And if anybody is passive, it's the prince. You know, he goes home and his mother casts some sort of spell on him and the princess has to go through all these interesting machinations to get him back. She rescues him; she's the one that has all the magic powers, she's the one with the magic cloak and if you throw it down, it becomes a forest full of trees. And that just was not the cutesy versions at all." (Ingersoll: 224-225)

Margaret Atwood clearly agrees with Bettelheim. She also expresses here some feminist preference as she is glad that it is the princess who saves the prince with her magic powers and not the opposite.

In the novel *The Robber Bride*, Margaret Atwood speaks explicitly of the fairy-tale *The Robber Bridegroom* (see 326-327). Roz's twin daughters are very young at that time but are already impetuous and sure of themselves. They are passing through a period in which they often want to change stories so that they be more to their taste. This gradually turns into a "feminist" phase where they decide that every character should be female.

"Winnie the Pooh was female, Piglet was female, Peter Rabbit was female. If Roz slipped up and said "he," they would correct her: *She! She!* They would insist. All of their stuffed animals were female, too. Roz still doesn't know why. [...] It's odd what a difference it makes, changing the pronoun" (*The Robber Bride*: 326).

Significantly, "Aunt" Tony's choice of literature for the twins is also the unabridged version, containing "those authentic fairy tales[...]not a word changed, all the pecked-out eyes and

cooked bodies and hanged corpses and red-hot nails intact. Tony said they were more true to life that way.”(326)

Tony, the narrator, also recollects telling the twins about *The Robber Bridegroom*:

“The beautiful maiden, the search for a husband, the arrival of the rich and handsome stranger who lures innocent girls to his stronghold in the woods and then chops them up and eats them.

<<One day a suitor appeared. He was...>>

<<She! She! clamour the twins.

<<All right, Tony, let's see you get out of this one, >> says Roz, standing in the doorway.

<<We could change it to *The Robber Bride*, >> says Tony. <<Would that be adequate? >>

The twins give it some thought, and say it will do. [...]

<<In that case, >> says Tony, <<who do you want her to murder? Men victims or women victims? Or maybe an assortment ? >>

The twins remain true to their principles, they do not flinch. They opt for women, in every single role. [...]

The Robber Bride, thinks Roz. Well, why not? Let the grooms take it in the neck for once. The Robber Bride, lurking in her mansion in the dark forest, preying on the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron. Like Zenia.” (326-327)

This passage seems to be a sort of clue from the author about the symbolic side of the entire book. It is as if the author gives readers a hint about what basis the novel is written on.

It is interesting to note that the twins want all the characters without fail to be women, unlike Roz, who thinks it might be rather “nice” to make the grooms suffer once, instead of it always being the brides. We can see that Roz is very bitter. She feels wounded by Zenia and Mitch and wishes things were different. This contrasts with the twins, who are not extremist feminists, as they do not seem to be truly against men. Their will to change the gender is mainly a game, motivated by their wish to see women in action, and not by a wish to annihilate men.

Atwood clearly considers that Zenia “kills” all the men. My first thought was that the fairy-tale is reversed, since men suffer instead of women. Yet in this novel, one could almost say that Roz, Charis and Tony suffer more than their partners. This would then bring us back to the twins’ version of the story, where one woman is cruel to other women. There could also be a mixture of the two, with everybody getting hurt: the men, their partners, and perhaps the cruel woman, too. The latter may also suffer, because her actions show a seriously deranged state of mind. These three suppositions need to be discussed as all highly probable. Looking more closely at the fairy-tale, we will be able to decide which of these possibilities seems the most relevant.

Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* in Relation to Grimm's Fairy-Tale *The Robber Bridegroom*

In order to put the novel in relation to the fairy-tale, I shall first of all make a short summary of the latter, so that we can examine the differences.

Summary:

There was once a miller, who wanted a "good" marriage for his beautiful daughter. A very rich and apparently proper suitor appears, and the miller betroths his daughter to him. The young girl however takes a dislike to her fiancé. One day he asks her to come to his house on the following Sunday. The house is hidden in the dark forest but the young man says he will strew ashes on the path so that she may find the way. On Sunday the girl feels anxious, so she strews peas and lentils on the ground as she walks. The house is very gloomy and mysterious and, as she enters, a voice warns her to leave. She goes on though, through empty rooms, until she sees a very old woman who cannot stop shaking. The young girl asks her where she can find her betrothed. The old woman tells her that he plans first to kill her, then cook and eat her. So the young girl hides behind a large cask, knowing that she will flee later on with the elderly lady. Soon the young man and his gang return with a young girl and force her to drink three wines: red wine, white wine, and a yellow wine, which kills her. They then pull off her clothes, cut her up, and sprinkle salt on the pieces. The dead girl has a gold ring on her little finger. One of the robbers cuts off the finger but it springs into the air and lands behind the cask, where the girl is hiding. Trembling, the girl is afraid of being found, but the robber soon postpones his search for the ring and returns to the feast.

The old woman then adds a sleeping draught to the robbers' wine, and they all fall asleep, thus permitting the girl and the old woman to flee. They return home following the path where the peas and lentils have sprouted. The girl tells her father everything. Then comes the day fixed for the wedding. At the wedding feast, everyone tells a tale. When it is the bride's turn she says she had a dream but in fact she tells the story of what happened in the robber's house. After every phrase she utters the bridegroom says: «My darling, this is only a dream.» but the more she tells, the paler he becomes. Then, talking about the finger, the girl produces it and shows it to everybody. The robber tries to flee but the guests seize him and deliver him and his band to justice, whereupon they are condemned to death.

The first thing that struck me was the fact that in both stories dreams have quite a lot of importance. In the novel, Tony, Charis and Roz all have dreams:

- Tony has two dreams:

The first one happens some time after West has left her. It is an underwater dream, in which she effortlessly swims through the water, before coming to "an edge, a chasm." and suddenly discovers that "she isn't in the sea at all but miniaturized, inside her own brain." A short time after she sees "someone walking away from her. She swims faster but it's no use, she's held in place, an aquarium goldfish bumping its nose against glass. [...] She wakes up gasping and choking, her throat constricted, her face streaming with tears."(208)

In the second dream Tony is playing a mute piano, while the house around her begins to burn. She sees "a tall man [...] standing in the corner. It's West, but why is he wearing those clothes, why is his hair black, why does he have a hat? There's a suitcase beside him on the floor. [...] Zenia is there at the door. [Tony] can see that Zenia has gills. [...] West is going, he's putting his arm around Zenia, he's turning his back."(439-440)

It is interesting to note that in both dreams Tony imagines that West is leaving her for Zenia. We can see that her greatest fear is that this woman will come back and that West will leave again. Tony knows that "[West is] only on loan. Zenia [is] his addiction; one sip of her and he'd be gone."(210)

- Charis imagines that she is transformed into "a body of light" capable of gliding out the window. "She floats [...] over the city" and flies in the window of a hotel. Zenia is in the room, and "Charis merges into her". Then "there's a knock on the door. She goes to open [...] it's Billy, in striped pyjamas, his body grown older, bloated, his face raw meat."(440)

- Roz 's first dream shows a frantic state of mind. She "is opening doors. Nothing in here, nothing in there, and she's in a hurry [...] and she has no clothes on [...] her slack raw embarrassing body. Finally she finds the right door." but there are only men's clothes in the wardrobe. "The first coat she pulls from a hanger is damp and covered with snails."(78)

Another dream is about Zenia. Roz dreams that she is "reassembling herself from the fragments of her own body after the bomb explosion." (78) This means that she is coming back, and Roz has a great fear of this happening.

The most important dream Roz has is that she is walking through the forest. "Paper money blows here and there, like candy-bar wrappers tossed away." Then she enters her house, hoping to see Mitch. "But she can't go in, because a man in an overcoat is blocking her way. [...] Despite appearances, despite everything, she knows this man is Zenia." (441-442)

The most important thing to note is that each of the three friends dreams of Zenia disappearing with their partner. This shows very well that their fear of Zenia follows them not only through the day, but through the night too...

Another interesting thing I would like to mention is that in the fairy-tale, what the young girl describes as a dream is in fact reality. If one puts this in relation with the nightmares in the novel, we could also say that these "dreams" almost describe reality, as the three women's fear is as big there as in true life. This shows that the fairy-tale basis is much more present in the novel than one might imagine at first.

Margaret Atwood is not the only one to be preoccupied with the subject of dreams, as psychoanalysts have busied themselves with the significance of dreams for a long time. Two of these are particularly noteworthy: Bettelheim, who speaks of the psychological interpretation of fairy-tales, and Freud, whose whole theory is based on showing that dreams are nurtured by the unconscious. Because the oneiric world has apparently a lot to do with fairy-tales, the fact that there are many dreams in the novel is certainly a reminder of the basis of the script: the fairy-tale.

Generally speaking, the tale told by the Grimm brothers and the novel are similar. In the latter, we observe the twins' vision of the tale (i.e. A Feminist Twist to a Fairy Tale). Of course one could also think of a simple inversion of the roles. A woman plays the robber and the men are the ones who are hurt. But this brings us to a problem, because in the fairy-tale the young girl does not really suffer, as she is not taken in by her betrothed. This contrasts with the novel, in which the men are duped and suffer very much, reduced to nothing by Zenia.

So I have decided to rely on the twins' interpretation, which appears more relevant to both sides. Zenia makes Roz, Tony and Charis suffer - this would be depicted by the young girl, who, without being really taken in, does suffer at the awful sights she beholds. Then, we have the old lady in the fairy-tale. She kindly offers help and reassurance, even

though she cannot stop shaking. This is applicable to each of the three friends' stories. Each woman is in turn destroyed and reassured by one of the others, although this one is also afraid of Zenia (→ shaking from fear of Zenia).

If we call Zenia the robber, the girl killed and cut up is the partner of either one of the three friends and the onlooker is Roz, Charis or Tony. Let us take each person in turn:

- **Tony's** husband is unfaithful but Tony welcomes him back. This shows the strength of the bond between them, Tony is prepared to forgive and continue the marriage.
- **Charis** is left and her partner does not return. However, according to her narration, we see that if he *did* return, Charis would probably let him come back.
- **Roz** has had the same thing done to her many times: her husband Mitch is very often unfaithful to her, but she lets it pass, because she knows their marriage is stronger than her husband's "things." The only problem is when Zenia arrives. She is the only one who is more important to Mitch than Roz and his marriage to her - so he goes away - but then he is rejected and comes back to his wife, thinking she will forgive him and let it pass. But she kicks him out. Now why? That is the question. And the first answer to it is that it is not the first time he is unfaithful, and so her patience is totally worn-out. But there is also a more important one, which is the timing of the novel: it is all very well for the fairy-tale, because at the time it was written there was not such an upsurge of feminist ideas as in the eighties. After being walked over by her husband for many years, Roz has at last a clearly feminist reaction, and says she refuses to be treated in that way, so she throws Mitch out.

To conclude, I would say that in companionship love is strong, but respect and faithfulness are also needed. If we compare with the fairy-tale, in two cases out of three (Charis and Tony) the novel is similar because the "finger with the wedding-ring" brings the partners back together. But in one of the cases, the wife (Roz) becomes a feminist and banishes the finger with the ring out of her life. This changes the outcome of the story, rendering it more modern and perhaps more plausible for our epoch.

Zenia The Man-eater.

Does Zenia deserve this title of Robber Bride? Literally one could ask why she is a *robber*. The men who leave their wives for her have not been taken away by force. They are grown men and have a will of their own. They choose to be unfaithful and to follow Zenia, forsaking their partners. So they have definitely not been robbed. It is the women who have been robbed! The fact that no one resists is very much criticised by the author. So Zenia is in some way a robber, because she makes the wives left behind feel that they have been robbed, but this is also because of the men's weakness. As to being a bride, Zenia does not portray the traditional image of an innocent young bride, dressed in white, pure and kind..., she is a more modern bride: imposing, domineering and impressive.

The title "*The Robber Bride*" describes more accurately the feelings of the three friends, who feel they have been robbed of their men. The use of the term "robbed" helps them, in a way, to forgive their men, inferring that it was not their choice to leave and follow Zenia. This is also probably to comfort themselves: they cannot bear to think that their husbands wilfully left them because they were not as good as Zenia. They also do not want to accept having married someone so weak and easily influenced and try to put the entire fault on the woman.

However, whatever her designation is, Zenia is an excessively mean woman, who thinks only of herself, deceives everybody and treats the whole world condescendingly, as if she were infinitely superior. The name "Robber Bride," by its sharpness, appears then rather justified. The title of the book and Zenia's nickname refer to the fairy-tale "*The Robber Bridegroom*." The author acknowledges the origin of the novel, by turning the original title of the fairy-tale into the feminine gender, transcribing it as "The Robber Bride".

Tony, Roz and Charis: Three Different Characters Facing a Macho World.

Tony, Roz and Charis are three totally different characters. We are allowed to examine their roles separately since the author introduces each one singly, only to make them converge afterwards in their mutual friendship. One could express surprise at these three women being friends since they have not much in common and their ideas are very different. One member of the trio often finds another's ideas totally off the mark. For example "Roz finds Charis an endearing nincompoop - let's face it, a polymath she's not - and mostly dismisses her gauzy metaphysics"(427). However, when I think of Zenia I understand how these three have become so close: Zenia has destroyed a part of each of them, but each has helped to get the other back on her feet, and this has brought them together, making them very good friends. Tony herself says:

"they don't have much in common except the catastrophe that brought them together, if Zenia can be called a catastrophe; but over time they've developed a loyalty to one another, an *esprit de corps*. Tony has come to like these women, she's come to consider them as friends, or the next thing to it. They are gallant, they have battle scars, they've been through fire; and each of them knows things about the others, by now, that nobody else does." (31)

Charis thinks that "in a way they are inappropriate friends for her to have. [...] But Tony and Roz are friends now, that's beyond a doubt. They're part of her pattern, for this life" (47). This shows clearly that in other circumstances the three would not have been such friends, and *were* not so before.

All three lived in the same boarding-house when they were young. It was called McClung Hall and was a residence for women only. Tony was very much apart from all the others and says "she had the sensation of living by herself" and she "did not feel she had much in common with these other girls." (128). For Tony, Roz was "one of the Common Room girls. She had a loud voice, and called Tony Toinette. Or, worse, Tonikins; [...] Tony hadn't liked her, at that period. She'd considered her intrusive and crude and smothering." (128-129). Tony was not the only isolated student, Charis was one too, but they did not talk to each other. One evening Tony sees Charis supposedly sleepwalking and follows her, even though "Charis was none of her business, she'd never said more than two words to her, but she felt she ought to follow her to make sure no moving vehicles bumped into her"(131). Finding out that in fact Charis was wide awake, Tony is annoyed, and thinks:

"Roz and the girls in the Common Room might be abrasive, but at least they were solid and uncomplicated, they were known quantities. Charis on the other hand was slippery and translucent and potentially clinging, like soap film or gelatine or the prehensile tentacles of sea anemones. If you touched her, some of her might come off on you. She was contagious and better left alone." (132)

The beginning of the novel is one of the most interesting parts for examining each person's viewpoint. The author describes the same scene through the point of view of each of these women in turn, thus directly showing each woman's character and ideas one by one. All three see the scene with their own eyes and each notes different details, giving them more or less importance. Each has different thoughts and each reacts in a different manner. Language varies a lot from one person to another and, though perhaps this is less significant, physically they are also dissimilar.

The beginning of the book shows that everybody thinks Zenia is dead and that at last they can breathe freely, at last they can be more peaceful and live their lives without fear. Roz, Tony and Charis have arranged to meet for their monthly lunch in "the Toxique," a restaurant. We see each of them waking, getting up and doing their usual routine before leaving, and also looking forward to the lunch. Each person thinks of their partners or ex-partners and thus their thoughts merge briefly on to a more painful subject: Zenia. Each then leaves for work, before making their way through the city around noon, for their lunch appointment. They meet there and eat together calmly, until the door of the restaurant opens and Zenia walks in. The three become very nervous, their world falling apart ...

One of the main scenes of the novel, worth some lengthy examination, is the moment when Zenia, presumed dead, strides into the restaurant where the three friends are eating quietly (see 34-37, 71-73, 111-112). It involves the three friends at the same time, and allows us to compare their individual reactions to the event. Just before Zenia's fatal entrance, Roz and Tony are having an animated discussion about war, while Charis dreams and does not follow the conversation at all. Roz has a moment of distraction from the conversation too, while thinking out ideas for a new business project she has been offered. When Zenia arrives, Charis is still half in her day-dream, Tony is talking away and Roz is thinking of her project.

However, it turns out to be Charis who sees Zenia first, though Tony is the first to react. Charis, in fact, has seen her long before and tries to build up her strength to affront Zenia, who, she thinks, has returned from the dead so that they can talk. Charis sees the newcomer as a ghost first of all and thinks she is the only one who sees her. Zenia's aura looks very dark and menacing to Charis. For Roz the first shock is seeing the awful look on Tony's face, and so realising that something is seriously wrong. As her back is turned to the door, she has not seen the woman enter. Tony tells them that it is Zenia, thus making Charis doubt that she has come back for her only. Tony stays rather calm, but Roz lets out a violent "Shit. It's her"(72) Tony afterwards remains quite objective towards Zenia and surveys her appearance, her movements etc. as composedly as possible.

As Zenia strides past without looking at them, the three feel put down, especially Charis who feels as if she does not exist and has to fight very hard to surface. Closing her eyes, she sees an image of something dark toppling over, through the air, down and down. Roz's main feeling is enormous jealousy. Zenia is as beautiful as ever and even though Roz knows a lot of it is artificial, she feels very small and ugly and inferior to Zenia. Tony thinks of it as a war and imagines fighting Zenia. Both Roz and Tony wonder what Zenia wants, and Roz is very frightened, thinking she is the reason for Zenia's return.

The three friends leave the restaurant, Tony being the only one who stays cool. She alone remembers coming out of the restaurant - Charis and Roz both find themselves outside without remembering having walked to the door and going through it. This shows that these two are very shaken, which should strike the reader as peculiar, because Tony is the one who still has her man, West, and so has something to lose. Roz and Charis have both already lost their partners to Zenia and so are less vulnerable. Nevertheless, Zenia re-awakens memories too strong to bury forever, and that is probably why the two are so upset.

The event also helps the reader to learn about the three different personalities of the main characters:

- **Tony** is an extremely small person and has huge complexes about this. This is probably why she has no interest whatsoever for fashion, clothes or anything linked to appearance. She is an intellectual, and has a great passion for war, which she teaches at university. For her, everything must have an explanation, and chaos must be arranged into order. She is a rationalist, and, on the one hand, she is rather sure of herself. On the other hand, she is not so confident: she is afraid and always on the defensive. She thinks people wish her ill. She is very nostalgic and lives almost totally in the past.
- **Charis** is very thin and pale, with grey-blond hair, and her way of dressing is calculated to be soft and flowing. She is a vegetarian, close to nature, and has a vague notion of money. She hates negative things like war, blood, punishments, she wants to have only positive thoughts. She is looking for an interior light and gives a lot of importance to intuition and emotions. She believes in an oval god and in reincarnation, would like to be a bird, is sensitive to auras and is rather superstitious (for example; she believes in the telling of Tarot cards and quartz pendula). Her time is the present, in which she tries to live as much as possible, as she claims: "We should try to live in the *now*-don't you think? Or at least, I try to"(70).

- **Roz** is rather rounded and heavy and feels bad about that. She dresses with a lot of care, puts on a lot of make-up and dyes her hair often. She takes up a lot of space, being very effusive, dynamic and talkative. She is a very practical, intelligent, quick woman, as well as an extremely rich and efficient businesswoman. She never has time to think of the details of the present, as she is always on the run, thinking of the future. She is also very maternal, especially towards her son, and panics a lot when facing life. Although often depressed, she wants to live well and happily.

From these brief characteristics, we note that, apart from their physical aspects and ways of living, the three characters have a specific relationship to time as well. Tony focuses on the past. She is a historian and incessantly thinks of the past, be it wars or her personal history. Charis, as said before, lives in the present. She does not want to dwell on previous painful events and does not want to worry about the future so as to be able to enjoy the present. And Roz always makes plans for the future and tries to get away from the depressing present, so her time is the future.

Roz, Tony and Charis together form an entity, a sort of block against the world, each of them representing one set of ideas, and a focus on time. If one examines each character's specific time closely, one can see that when alone, each is rather too much focused on one aspect of time. But when together, they form one group containing the past, the present and the future, thus making light be thrown on everything, and not only on one side of things. This means that together they are armed and strong. Alone each one got hurt, but the three together form a strong barricade enabling them to beat their opponent at last.

Tony, Roz and Charis in Relation to Zenia.

The first thing that can be said about each one of the three friends is that they are naive and trustful at first, and only little by little do they distrust Zenia. Each of them is also very much under the direction of Zenia at the beginning of their friendship. When the friendship collapses, fear remains a dominant feature of their lives. Zenia picks on those women who are self-conscious, naive and not entirely accepted. These will then rely on her, so that she can manipulate them as much as she wants and then take what she really wants: their husbands or partners. But does she really want them? The answer is negative, as she destroys them, and leaves them shortly after “owning” them. Her real aim is to hurt her female “friends,” and this she achieves easily.

When Zenia reappears in the Toxique, the general feeling is the same: fear, horror and regret for the past. However, each character has her specific fear. Roz is jealous of Zenia’s appearance: she surveys Zenia’s good looks with envy, because Roz’s main complex is her figure. Tony is less jealous of Zenia’s looks and mainly thinks of her husband West, whom she wants to protect from Zenia. Charis tries to be serene and thinks that Zenia is her ghost sent to tell her where her partner is. Each fears Zenia but sees her through a different angle and expresses it with different language. This can already be seen at Zenia’s pseudo-burial, which all three attend: “They wanted to see the end of Zenia, make sure she was now fully (Tony’s word) inoperational. Charis’s word was *peaceful*. Roz’s was *kaput*.”(12). Then when the three friends have lunch together, still thinking Zenia dead, “they don’t talk about Zenia, though. Not any more, not since they buried her. As Charis says, talking about her might hold her on this earth. As Tony says, she’s bad for the digestion. And as Roz says, why give her the air time?”(31). These three different ways of expressing oneself are rather similar to the reactions the three have when they see Zenia alive.

Zenia incarnates evil made female. The author introduces three characters, revealing their perception of this evil. At first, the characters were taken in by Zenia but afterwards they discern her true nature. Zenia has thus first been useful to the three friends, enabling them to become less naive, less gullible and stronger. As Atwood quotes at the beginning of the book, “a rattlesnake that doesn’t bite teaches you nothing” (Op. cited in West 1).

At the end of the book Tony asks: “Was she in any way like us? Or to put it the other way around: Are we in any way like her?”(p. 520). This leaves us with the idea that

every person is a little like Zenia, that is, a little wicked. The three main characters are not evil, but are indeed attracted to evil and consequently to Zenia. Roz is especially drawn towards evil, as she says herself:

"Sometimes Roz gets herself down. It's her own worthiness that does it, the pressure on her to be nice, to be ethical, to behave well; it's the rays of good behaviour, of good nature, of cluck-clucking good-as-gold goody-goodness beaming out from around her head. It's her best intentions. If she is so goldarned worthy, why isn't she having more fun? Sometimes she would like to cast off her muffling Lady Bountiful cloak, stop tiptoeing through the scruples, cut loose, not in minor ways as she does now - a little swearing inside her head, some bad verbiage - but something really big. Some great whopping thoroughly despicable sin. [...] Sometimes - for a day at least, or even for an hour, or if nothing else was available then five minutes would do - sometimes she would like to be Zenia."(434-435)

Roz also remembers Zenia once saying in a carefree manner: "*Fuck the Third World! I'm tired of it!*" And the worst was that "Roz - although shocked, although gabbling, *Oh Zenia, you don't mean that!* - had felt an answering beat, in herself. A sort of echo, an urge to go that fast, be that loose, that greedy, herself, too. *Well, why not? You think they'd lift a finger, in the Third World, if it was you?*" (107).

Tony, too, felt excited by evil, when, as a child, she goes tobogganing with her mother. Her mother, alone, goes down the slope:

"She went at an astonishing speed. As she diminished down the slope, into the dusk, Tony clambered to her feet. Her mother was going away from her, she was vanishing, and Tony would be left alone on the cold hill.«No! No!» she screamed. [...] But inside herself she could hear another voice, also hers, which was shouting, fearlessly and with ferocious delight: *On! On!*"(152)

This recurrent theme of human nature present in classics such as Charles Baudelaire's anthology of poems entitled *Les Fleurs du Mal* is also present in the novel *The Robber Bride*. Baudelaire's theory is that the power of evil is enormous because, although we find it awful, we are drawn to it, and want to go on and on, because it is like a magnet that never lets us go. This is confirmed in *The Robber Bride* by the characters who are, on the one hand, afraid of Zenia, but also very much attracted by her strength and her liability to do evil - she does the things that they all sometimes wish to do, but do not dare to...

On the other hand, if one thinks more closely about Zenia, one can perhaps understand her better and almost grow to pity her. Zenia is a slave to her beauty. Her beautiful appearance can apparently be rather annoying at times because men are attracted to her by what she *looks* like rather than by what she *is*. This is similar to the problem Roz has, which is her money. Many men run after Roz because of her wealth - this makes it difficult for her to know whether the attraction is totally sincere or not. Zenia talks about this aspect of beauty. She says, "I'm so strung out. I've been on the edge, I've been out there so long; I've had to do it alone. I can't work it out with men, they all want the same thing from me"(404). The fact that Zenia is so slim shows clearly that her relation to

food is not normal, as she is almost anorexic, and on top of that, is a chain-smoker. This shows too that she is restless and not well. Perhaps the fact that she takes men away is because she needs to feel powerful, because inside she feels weak, and vulnerable. But the fact that she "owns" these men for a short time makes her totally cut off from the female world, because women are wary of her and unwilling to be friendly. The few friends she has, she has betrayed. Thus she remains alone, and lost ...

Conclusion

This novel can be examined in two contrasting ways. Firstly, one could say that it is a feminist novel, as it contains ideas associated with equality of the sexes. Secondly, one could adopt a completely opposite point of view, claiming that the author condemns the three friends because they are not feminist enough. What is clear is that many feminist questions are introduced and that the novel is very much influenced both by the period in which it was written and the place where it was situated. I say this because there was a very strong upsurge of feminism in Canada at the time of its publication.

For me, the novel is representative of the feminist movement in the way that the author depreciates Roz, Tony and Charis. In her eyes, they were too lenient with their companions and only became stronger after being abandoned by them, when it was too late. Each woman took good care of her partner, forgiving everything, from small things like forgetting to do their part of the housework to big things like being unfaithful. These failings are overlooked without a word. The women try to protect their partners from any pain and unhappiness, shouldering everything alone. But then comes Zenia, who destroys everything that had been constructed between each woman and her partner. Zenia leaves with the partners one after the other, dumping her "victim" shortly afterwards. The wives take their men's absence very badly, as they had never actually *left* the home before.

Zenia incarnates the bombshell that causes the important feminist questions to be asked. The author uses Zenia to put the three friends on a sort of trial, to see if they react in a feminist way. Tony's husband comes back and she lets him back in, without a word, thereby displaying totally non-feminist behaviour. Charis's partner does not return and she is left alone with her baby. We know, however, that she would like to know what happened to him and that she would welcome him back if he wanted to return. She does not feel angry towards him and her behaviour too is non-feminist. Roz is different. Her husband comes back to her, after being thrown out by Zenia. She does not accept him and pushes him out of her life. That leaves her alone and she often regrets having done this, but at least she has not been walked over and she has become a feminist. However, she becomes very bitter and self-conscious and her feminist conviction takes an excessive turn, in which only homosexuals are "real men," reliable and decent.

Two out of the three characters turn out to be almost totally non-feminist in that they do not reproach their partners anything and thus do not expect equality. Only Roz reacts in a feminist manner, but here another problem arises: Roz, although a feminist, is unhappy

because of her reaction, whereas Tony, although not a feminist, is happy, still living quietly with her husband. Here the roles are reversed. Roz works for the future of women, or at least for a change of mentality and she is the one who is unhappy! The author clearly condemns all the characters for their non-feminism, or, in Roz's case, for becoming a feminist too late! If they had all been feminists in the first place, all these events may never have happened! Each woman should have worked out a relationship based on equality and on discussion of their expectations, thus avoiding crisis and rupture in their couples. Through her book, Margaret Atwood questions our view of the world and of men and women's relationships, be it in everyday life or when married. Her novel is probably also an attempt to open people's eyes - hoping that by reading this book they will question their own lives. Nonetheless this book remains pure fiction and the author herself insists on this point, although saying clearly that she identifies with Zenia, and why :

Interviewer: "*To what extent [is] [...] The Robber Bride based on actual acquaintances and experiences?*"

Margaret Atwood: "[...] They're fiction, as is obvious. [...] The characters are either inventions or pastiches [...] I do not wish the people in my [novel] to be identified but some are anyway, although they are rarely the people that other people think they are. Let us say that fiction uses a certain amount of character conventions, and so does real life. What happens when a character in fiction gets identified as somebody real is that one of the stock characters life keeps throwing up gets identified with one of the stock characters fiction keeps throwing up. As for the plots, they are by and large fictional, but they are the kind of thing that does happen, can happen or might happen. It's the business of the fiction writer to be plausible. That's another way of saying it's the business of the fiction writer to tell you lies you will believe! That is why, when people say to me, "Which of the characters in *The Robber Bride* do you identify with most closely?" I say, "I identify with Zenia. She is the professional liar, and what else do fiction writers do but create lies that other people will believe?" That takes them aback somewhat, they thought I would say Tony; but no, it is Zenia. She's the liar.

The difference between what Zenia does and what fiction writers do is that at the front of the work of fiction it always says, "This is fiction." It's like a cigarette package warning. But then everyone immediately disbelieves that and starts identifying all the characters. Whereas if you write an autobiography the first thing they do is say, "Of course she distorted the truth, and she's lying ... and she's left things out ..." ("Margaret Atwood - Question and Answer Session")

Like Margaret Atwood, I find Zenia's character very interesting. She makes the whole plot move and forces one to react. The whole novel, through Zenia and the problems she causes, leaves the reader reflecting on life and on relationships between human beings.

Pully, 27th October 2002

Fiona-Aileen Kraege

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This traces feminism from its origins to our day. Very complete, but such precise knowledge was not really asked for.

Internet sites:

The Margaret Atwood Information Site. 3. October 2002. 16. October 2002

<<http://www.owtoad.com>>

The entire site is absolutely fascinating. Contains information about Margaret Atwood, her books and other relevant titles, as well as extracts from articles and interviews.

“Margaret Atwood-Question and Answer Session.” *The Margaret Atwood Information Site*. 3. October 2002. 16. October 2002

<<http://www.owtoad.com/q.html>>

A relevant passage of this text has been quoted in the conclusion of my essay. It shows Margaret Atwood denying an autobiographical intent in her work and explaining her closeness to her evil character: Zenia.

“The Robber Bride’ by Margaret Atwood.” *Reading Group Guide*

<http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides/robber_bride-author.asp>

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After long research to find the original German version of this fairy-tale, I finally had to be content with this coherent and unabridged translation.