MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood spent her first eleven years in sparsely populated areas of northern Ontario and Quebec, where her father worked as an entomologist-an upbringing that may help explain her enduring concern with humanity's often-destructive relationship with the natural world. Educated at the University of Toronto and Harvard, the woman now widely regarded as Canada's preeminent woman of letters published her first poem at nineteen and the first of numerous poetry collections, *Double Persephone,* three years later. An equally gifted short-story writer who counts Edgar Allan Poe among her early inspirations, Atwood is best known for her novels. *(Wikipedia* not inaccurately describes her as "among the most-honoured authors of fiction in recent history.") Translated into over 30 languages and often, like her poetry, exploring the unique experiences and perspectives of women, past, present. and future, her novels include straightforwardly realistic narratives like *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Bodily Harm* (1982), at least one modernized fairy tale *(The Robber Bride* [1993]), multilayered historical fictions such as *Alias Grace* (1996) and the Booker Prize-winning *The Blind Assassin* (2000), as well as the futuristic dystopias Atwood herself prefers to call "speculative" rather than "science fiction"—Oryx *and Crake* (2003); its companion, *The Year of the Flood* (2009); and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), which inspired both a Danish opera and a Hollywood movie.

Lusus Naturae

What could be done with me, what should be done with me? These were the same question. The possibilities were limited. The family discussed them all, lugubriously, endlessly, as they sat around the kitchen table at night, with the shutters closed, eating their dry whiskery sausages and t heir potato soup. If I was in one of my lucid phases I would sit with them, entering into the conversation as best I could while searching out the chunks of potato in my bowl. If not, I'd be off in the darkest corner, mewing to myself and listening to the twittering voices nobody else could hear.

"She was such a lovely baby," my mother would say. "There was nothing wrong with her." It saddened her to have given birth to an item such as myself: it was like a reproach, a judgment. What had she done wrong?

"Maybe it's a curse," said my grandmother. She was as dry and whiskery as the sausages, but in her it was natural because of her age.

"She was fine for years," said my father. "It was after that case of measles, when she was seven. After that."

"Who would curse us?" said my mother.

My grandmother scowled. She had a long list of candidates. Even so, there was no one she could single out. Our family had always been respected, and even liked, more or less. It still was. It still would be, if something could be done about me. Before I leaked out, so to say.

"The doctor says it's a disease," said my father. He liked to claim he was a rational man. He took the newspapers. It was he who insisted that I learn to read, and he'd persisted in his encouragement, despite everything. I no longer nestled into the crook of his arm,

however. He sat me on the other side of the table. Though this enforced distance pained me, I could see his point.

"Then why didn't he give us some medicine?" said my mother. My grandmother snorted. She had her own ideas, which involved puffballs and stump water. Once she'd held my head under the water in which the dirty clothes were soaking, praying while she did it. That was to eject the demon she was convinced had flown in through my mouth and was lodged near my breastbone. My mother said she had the best of intentions, at heart.

Feed her bread, the doctor had said. *She'll want a lot of bread. That, and potatoes. She'll want to drink blood. Chicken blood will do,* or *the blood of a cow. Don't let her have too much.* He told us the name of the disease, which had some Ps and Rs in it and meant nothing to us. He'd only seen a case like me once before, he'd said, looking at my yellow eyes, my pink teeth, my red fingernails, the long dark hair that was sprouting on my chest and arms. He wanted to take me away to the city, so other doctors could look at me, but my family refused. "She's a lusus naturae," he'd said.

"What does that mean?" said my grandmother.

"Freak of nature," the doctor said. He was from far away: we'd summoned him. Our own doctor would have spread rumors. "It's Latin. Like a monster." He thought I couldn't hear, because I was mewing. "It's nobody's fault:'

"She's a human being," said my father. He paid the doctor a lot of money to go away to his foreign parts and never come back.

"Why did God do this to us?" said my mother.

"Curse or disease, it doesn't matter," said my older sister. "Either way, no one will marry me if they find out:' I nodded my head: true enough. She was a pretty girl, and we weren't poor, we were almost gentry. Without me, her coast would be clear.

In the daytimes I stayed shut up in my darkened room: I was getting beyond a joke. That was fine with me, because I couldn't stand sunlight. At night, sleepless, I would roam the house, listening to the snores of the others, their yelps of nightmare. The cat kept me company. He was the only living creature who wanted to be close to me. I smelled of blood, old dried-up blood: perhaps that was why he shadowed me, why he would climb up onto me and start licking.

They'd told the neighbors I had a wasting illness, a fever, a delirium. The neighbors sent eggs and cabbages; from time to time they visited, to scrounge for news, but they weren't eager to see me: whatever it was might be catching.

* * *

It was decided that I should die. That way I would not stand in the way o~ my sister, I would not loom over her like a fate. *"Better* one happy than both miserable," said my grandmother, who had taken to sticking garlic cloves around my door frame. I agreed to this plan, as I wanted to be helpful.

The priest was bribed; in addition to that, we appealed to his sense of compassion. Everyone likes to think they are doing good while at the same time pocketing a bag of cash, and our priest was no exception. He told me God had chosen me as a special girl, a sort of bride, you might say. He said I was called on to make sacrifices. He said my sufferings would purify my soul. He said I was lucky, because I would stay innocent all my life, no man would want to pollute me, and then I would go straight to Heaven.

He told the neighbors I had died in a saintly manner. I was put on display in a very deep coffin in a very dark room, in a white dress with a lot of white veiling over me, fitting for a virgin and useful in concealing my whiskers. I lay there for two days, though of course I could walk around at night. I held my breath when anyone entered. They tiptoed, they spoke in whispers, they didn't come close, they were still afraid of my disease. To my mother they said I looked just like an angel.

My mother sat in the kitchen and cried as if I really had died; even my sister managed to look glum. My father wore his black suit. My grandmother baked. Everyone stuffed themselves. On the third day they filled the coffin with damp straw and carted it off to the cemetery and buried it, with prayers and a modest headstone, and three months later my sister got married, She was driven to the church in a coach, a first in our family. My coffin was a rung on her ladder.

* * *

Now that I was dead, I was freer. No one but my mother was allowed into my room, my former room as they called it. They told the neighbors they were keeping It as a shrine to my memory. They hung a, picture of me on the door, a picture made when I still looked human. I didn’t know what I looked like now. I avoided mirrors.

In the dimness I read Pushkin, and Lord Byron, and the poetry of John Keats. I learned about blighted love, and defiance, and the sweetness of death. I found these thoughts comforting. My mother would bring me my potatoes and bread, and my cup of blood, and take away the chamber pot. Once she used to brush my hair, before it came out in handfuls; she'd been in the habit of hugging me and weeping; but she was past that now. She came and went as quickly as she could. However she tried to hide it, she resented me, of course. There's only so long you can feel sorry for a person before you come to feel that their affliction is an act of malice committed by them against you.

At night I had the run of the house, and then the run of the yard, and after (hat the run of the forest. I no longer had to worry about getting in the way of other people and their futures. As for me, I had no future. I had only a present, a present that changed—it seemed to me—along with the moon. If it weren't for the fits, and the hours of pain, and the twittering of the voices I couldn't understand, I might have said I was happy.

* * *

My grandmother died, then my father. The cat became elderly. My mother sank further into despair. "My poor girl," she would say, though I was no longer exactly a girl. "Who will take care of you when I'm gone?"

There was only one answer to that: it would have to be me. I began to explore 25 the

limits of my power. I found I had a great deal more of it when unseen than when seen, and most of all when partly seen. I frightened two children in the woods, on purpose: I showed them my pink teeth, my hairy face, my red fingernails, I mewed at them, and they ran away screaming. Soon people avoided our end of the forest. I peered into a window at night, and caused hysterics in a young woman. "A thing! I saw a thing!" she sobbed. I was a thing, then. I considered this. In what way is a thing not a person?

A stranger made an offer to buy our farm. My mother wanted to sell and move in with my sister and her gentry husband and her healthy growing family, whose portraits had just been painted; she could no longer manage; but how could she leave me?

"Do it," I told her. By now my voice was a sort of growl. "I'll vacate my room. There's a place I can stay:' She was grateful, poor soul. She had an attachment to me, as if to a hangnail, a wart: I was hers. But she was glad to be rid of me. She'd done enough duty for a lifetime.

During the packing-up and the sale of our furniture I spent the days inside a hayrick. It was sufficient, but it would not do for winter. Once the new people had moved in it was no trouble to get rid of them. I knew the house better than they did, its entrances, its exits, I could make my way around it in the dark. I became an apparition, then another one; I was a red-nailed hand touching a face in the moonlight; I was the sound of a rusted hinge that I made despite myself. They took to their heels, and branded our place as haunted. Then I had it to myself.

I lived on stolen potatoes dug by moonlight, on eggs filched from henhouses. Once in a while I'd purloin a hen—I'd drink the blood first. There were guard dogs, but though they howled at me, they never attacked: they didn't know what I was. Inside our house, I tried a mirror. They say dead people can't see their own reflections, and it was true; I could not see myself. I saw something, but that something was not myself: it looked nothing like the innocent, pretty girl I knew myself to be, at heart.

* * *

But now things are coming to an end. I've become too visible.
This is how it happened.

I was picking blackberries in the dusk, at the verge where the meadow met the trees, and I saw two people approaching, from opposite sides. One was a young man, the other a girl. His clothing was better than hers. He had shoes.

The two of them looked furtive. I knew that look-the glances over the shoulder, the stops and starts-as I was unusually furtive myself. I crouched in the brambles to watch. They met, they twined together, they fell to the ground. Mewing noises came from them, growls, little screams. Perhaps they were having fits, both of them at once. Perhaps they were—oh, at last!—beings like myself. I crept closer to see better. They did not look like me-they were not hairy, for instance, except on their heads, and I could tell this because they had shed most of their clothing-but then, it had taken me some time to grow into what I was. They must be in the preliminary stages, I thought. They know they are changing, they have sought out each other for the company, and to share their fits.

They appeared to derive pleasure from their flailings about, even if they occasionally bit each other. I knew how that could happen. What a consolation it would be to me if I, too, could join in! Through the years I had hardened myself to loneliness; now I found that hardness dissolving. Still, I was too timorous to approach them.

One evening the young man fell asleep. The girl covered him with his cast-off shirt and kissed him on the forehead. Then she walked carefully away.

I detached myself from the brambles and came softly toward him. There he was, asleep in an oval of crushed grass, as if laid out on a platter. I'm sorry to say I lost control. I laid my red-nailed hands on him. I bit him on the neck. Was it lust or hunger? How could I tell the difference? He woke up, he saw my pink teeth, my yellow eyes; he saw my black dress fluttering; he saw me running away. He saw where.

He told the others in the village, and they began to speculate. They dug up my coffin and found It empty, and feared the worst. Now they're marching toward this house, in the dusk, with long stakes, with torches. My sister is among them, and her husband, and the young man I kissed. I meant it to be a kiss.

What can I say to them, how can I explain myself? When demons are required someone will always be found to supply the part, and whether you step forward or are pushed is all the same in the end. "I am a human being," I could say. But what proof do I have of that? "I am a lusus naturae! Take me to the city! I should be studied!" No hope there. I'm afraid it's bad news for the cat. Whatever they do to me, they'll do to him as well.

I am of a forgiving temperament I know they have the best of intentions at heart. I've put on my white burial dress my white veil, as befits a virgin. One must have a sense of occasion. The twittering voices are very loud: it's time for me to take flight. I'll fall from the blazing rooftop like a comet, I'll blaze like a bonfire. They'll have to say many charms over my ashes, to make sure I'm really dead this time. After a while I'll become an upside-down saint; my finger bones will be sold as dark relics. I'll be a legend, by then.

Perhaps in Heaven I'll look like an angel. Or perhaps the angels will look like me. What a surprise that will be, for everyone else! It's something to look forward to.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How and why does the protagonist's attitude toward her own situation change over the course of the story? How and why does she paradoxically become more alive and powerful after she "dies" and as she becomes more and more "invisible"?

2. Why does she nonetheless choose to make herself "visible" at the story's conclusion (par. 30)? What new insight might this episode provide into both her character and situation, on the one hand, and "normal" human behavior, on the other? How, for example, might the conclusion complicate the idea that the story is exclusively about illness or disability and our attitudes toward it?

3. What conflicts does the protagonist's condition create for the story's other characters? How do they each understand that condition? How might the story encourage us to view their attitudes and behaviors?

4. Explore how the title of the story, and its translated meaning, signifies an allegorical theme in the story.