The Curse of Eve – Or, What I Learned in School

Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood and Jess Graeme Gibson

La Malédiction d'Eve ou – Ce que j'ai appris à l'école.

Dans cet aperçu des stéréotypes de femmes écrivains et de leur impact sur notre tradition littéraire, Atwood nous demande de permettre aux femmes – personnages et personnes – d'avoir leurs imperfections sans être catégorisées comme types.

Once upon a time, I would have not been invited to speak to you today. That time isn't really very long ago. In 1960, when I was attending university, it was widely known that the University College English department did not hire women, no matter what their qualifications. My own college did hire women, it just didn't promote them very rapidly. One of my teachers was a respected authority on Samuel Taylor Coleridge. She was a respected authority on Coleridge for a great many years before anyone saw fit to raise her from the position of Lecturer.

Luckily, I myself did not want to be an authority on Coleridge. I wanted to be a writer, but writers, as far as I could see, made even less than Lecturers, so I decided to go to graduate school. If I had had any burning academic ambitions, they would have taken a turn for the venomous when I was asked by one of my professors whether I really wanted to go to graduate school . . . wouldn't I rather get married? I've known a couple of men for whom marriage would have been a reasonable alternative to a career. Most, however, by force of circumstance, if not by inclination, have been like a friend of mine who is well known for never finishing anything he started.

'When I'm thirty,' he said to me once, 'I'll have to choose between marriage and a career.'

'What do you mean?' I said.

'Well, if I get married, I'll have to have a career,' he replied.

I, however, was expected to have one or the other, and this is one of the many ways in which I hope times have changed. Back then, no university in its right mind would have run a lecutre series entitled, 'Women on Women.' If it had done anything at all on the subject, it probably would have invited a distinguished psychologist, male, to talk about innate female masochism. College education for women was justified, if at all, on the grounds that it would make women into more intelligent wives and better-informed mothers. Authorities on women were usually men. They were assumed to possess that knowledge, like all other knowledge, by virtue of gender. The tables have turned and now it's women who are supposed to possess this knowledge, simply by birthright. I can only assume that's the reason I've been invited to speak to you, since I'm not an authority on women, or indeed on anything else.

I escaped from academia and bypassed journalism – which was the other career I considered, until I was told that women journalists usually ended up writing obituaries or wedding announcements for the women's page, in accordance with their ancient roles as goddesses of life and death, deckers of nuptial beds and washers of corpses. Finally, I became a professional writer. I've just finished a novel, so it's as a working novelist that I'd like to approach this general area.

I'll begin with a simple question, one which confronts every novelist, male or female, at some point in the proceedings and which certainly confronts every critic.

What are novels for? What function are they supposed to perform? What good, if any, are they supposed to do the reader? Are they supposed to delight or instruct, or both, and if so, is there ever a conflict between what we find delightful and what we find instructive? Should a novel be an exploration of hypothetical possibilities, a statement of truth, or just a good yarn? Should it be about how one ought to live one's life, how one can live one's life (usually more limited), or how most people live their lives? Should it tell us something about our society? Can it avoid doing this? More specifically, suppose I am writing a novel with a woman as the central character; how much attention should I pay to any of the above questions? How much attention will I be *forced* to pay through the preconception of critics? Do I want this character to be likeable, respectable, or believable? Is it possible for her to be all three? What are the assumptions of those who will do the liking, the respecting, or the believing? Does she have to be a good 'role model'?

I dislike the term 'role model' partly because of the context in which I first heard it. It was, of course, at university, a very male-oriented university which had a female college attached. The female college was looking for a Dean. My friend, who was a sociologist, explained that this person would have to be a good role model. 'What's that?' I asked. Well, the future Dean would not just have to have high academic credentials and the ability to get along with students, she would also have to be married, with children, good-looking, well dressed, active in community work, and so forth. I decided that I was a terrible role model. But then, I did not want to be a role model, I wanted to be a writer. One obviously would not have time for both.

It may be just barely acceptable for prospective Deans to be judged as role models, but as this is also a favorite technique of critics, especially when evaluating female characters in books and sometimes when evaluating the writers themselves, it has to be looked at quite carefully. Let me cite an example: several years ago, I read a review of Marian Engel's *The Honeyman Festival*, written by a female reviewer. The heroine of this novel is Minn, a very pregnant woman who spends a lot of her time reminiscing about the past and complaining about the present. She doesn't have a job. She doesn't have much self-esteem. She's sloppy and self-indulgent and guilt-ridden and has ambiguous feelings about her children, and also about her husband, who is away most of the time. The reviewer complained about this character's lack of initiative, apparent laziness and disorganization. She wanted a more positive, more energetic character, one capable of taking her life in hand, of acting more in accordance with the ideal woman then beginning to be projected by the women's movement. Minn was not seen as an acceptable role model, and the book lost points because of this.

My own feeling is that there are a lot more Minn-like women than there are ideal women. The reviewer might have agreed, but might also have claimed that by depicting Minn and only Minn – by providing no alternative to Minn – the writer was making a statement about the nature of Woman that would merely reinforce these undesirable Minnish qualities, already too much in evidence. She wanted success stories, not failure stories, and this is indeed a problem for the writer of fiction. When writing about women, what constitutes success? Is success even plausible? Why, for instance, did George Eliot, herself a successful female writer, never compose a story with a successful female writer as the central character? Why did Maggie Tulliver have to drown for her rebelliousness? Why could Dorothea Brooke find nothing better to do with her idealism than to invest it in two men, one totally unworthy of it, the other a bit of a simp? Why did Jane Austen's characters exercise their wit and intelligence in choosing the proper man rather than in the composition of comic novels?

One possible answer is that these novelists concerned themselves with the typical, or at least with events that would fall within the range of credibility for their readers; and they felt themselves, as woman writers, to be so exceptional as to lack credibility. In those days, a woman writer was a freak, an oddity, a suspicious character. How much of that sentiment lingers on today, I will leave you to ask yourselves, while at the same time quoting a remark made to me several years ago by a distinguished male writer. 'Women poets,' he said, 'always have a furtive look about them. They know they're invading male territory.' He followed this with a statement to the effect that women, including women writers, were only good for one thing, but since this lecture is going to be printed, I will not quote this rather unprintable remark.

To return to my problem, the creation of a fictional female character . . . I'll come at it from a different angle. There's no shortage of female characters in the literary tradition, and the novelist gets her or his ideas about women from the same sources everyone else does: from the media, books, films, radios, television and newspapers, from home and school, and from the culture at large, the body of received opinion. Also, luckily, sometimes, through personal experience which contradicts all of these. But my hypothetical character would have a choice of many literary ancestresses. For example, I might say a few words about Old Crones, Delphic Oracles, the Three Fates, Evil Witches, White Witches, White Goddesses, Bitch Goddesses, Medusas with snaky heads who turn men to stone, Mermaids with no souls, Little Mermaids with no tongues, Snow Queens, Sirens with songs, Harpies with wings, Sphinxes, with and without secrets, women who turn into dragons, dragons who turn into women, Grendel's mother and why she is worse than Grendel; also about evil stepmothers, comic mothers-in-law, Earth Mothers, the earth as mother, virgin mothers, teeth mothers, fairy godmothers, unnatural mothers, natural mothers, Mad Mothers, Medea who slew her own children, Lady Macbeth and her spot, Eve the mother of us all, the all-mothering sea, and Mother, what have I to do with thee? Also about Wonder Woman, Superwoman, Batgirl, Mary Marvel, Catwoman and Rider Haggard's She with her supernatural powers and electric organ, who could kill a mere mortal man by her embrace; also about Little Miss Muffet and her relationship with the spider, Little Red Riding Hood and her indiscretions with the wolf, Andromeda chained to her rock, Rapunzel and her tower, Cinderella and her sackcloth and ashes, Beauty and the Beast, the wives of Bluebeard (all but the last), Mrs. Radcliffe's persecuted maidens fleeing seduction and murder, Jane Eyre fleeing impropriety and Mr. Rochester, Tess of the D'Urbervilles seduced and abandoned; also about the Angel in the House, Agnes pointing upwards, the redemptive love of a good woman, Little Nell dying to the hypocritical sobs of the whole century, Little Eva doing likewise, much to the relief of the reader, Ophelia babbling down her babbling brook, the Lady of Shalott swan-songing her way towards Camelot, Fielding's Amelia snivelling her way through hundreds of pages of gloom and peril and Thackeray's Amelia doing likewise but with less sympathy from her author. Also about the rape of Europa by the bull, the rape of Leda by the swan, the rape of Lucretia and her consequent suicide, miraculous escapes from rape on the parts of several female saints, rape fantasies and how they differ from rape realities, men's magazines featuring pictures of blondes and Nazis, sex and violence from *The Canterbury Tales* to T.S. Eliot . . . and I quote . . . 'I knew a man once did a girl in. Any man might do a girl in. Any man has to, needs to, wants to, once in a lifetime do a girl in.' Also about the Whore of Babylon, the whore with the heart of gold, the love of a bad woman, the whore without a heart of gold, the Scarlet Letter, the Scarlet Woman, the Red Shoes, Madame Bovary and her quest for the zipless fuck, Molly Bloom and her chamber pot and her eternal yes, Cleopatra and her friend the Asp, an association which casts a new light on Little Orphan Annie. Also about orphans, also about Salome and the head of John the Baptist, and Judith and the head of Holofernes. Also about True Romance magazines and their relationship to Calvinism. Unfortunately, I have neither the time nor the knowledge necessary to discuss all these in the depth and breadth they deserve, and they do deserve it. All, of course, are stereotypes of women drawn from the Western European literary tradition and its Canadian and American mutations.

There are a good many more variations than those I've mentioned, and although the Western literary tradition was created largely by men, by no means all the female figures I have mentioned were male-invented, male-transmitted or male-consumed. My point in mentioning them is to indicate not only the multiplicity of female images likely to be encountered by a reader but especially the range. Depictions of women, even by men, are by no means limited to the figure of the Solitary Weeper (that creature of helpless passivity who cannot act but only suffer), which seems to have been encouraged by the dominant philosophy about women up until the nineteenth century. There was more to women, even stereotypical women, even then.

The moral range of female stereotypes seems to me to be wider than that of male characters in literature. Heroes and villains have much in common, after all. Both are strong, both are in control of themselves, both perform actions and face the consequences. Even those supernatural male figures, God and the Devil, share a number of characteristics. Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty are practically twins, and it is very difficult to tell by the costumes and activities alone which of the Marvel Comics' supermen are supposed to be bad and

which good. Macbeth, although not very nice, is understandable, and besides, he never would have done it if it hadn't been for the Three Witches and Lady Macbeth. The Three Witches are a case in point. Macbeth's motive is ambition, but what are the witches' motives? They have none, except to delight in evil, and this is true of a number of female stereotypes. They have no motives. Like stones or trees, they simply are: the good ones purely good, the bad ones purely bad. About the closest a male figure can come to this is Iago or Mr. Hyde, but Iago is at least partly motivated by envy and the other half of Mr. Hyde is the all-too-human Dr. Jekyll. Even the Devil wants to win, but the extreme types of female figure do not seem to want anything at all. Sirens eat men because that is what Sirens do. The horrible spider-like old women in D.H. Lawrence's stories – I am thinking especially of the grandmother in 'The Virgin and the Gypsy' – are given no motives for their horribleness other than something Lawrence calls 'the female will.' Macbeth murders because he wants to be king, to gain power, whereas the Three Witches are merely acting the way witches act. Witches, like poems, should not mean, but be. One may as well ask why the sun shines.

This quality of natural force, good or bad, this quality of thinghood, appears most frequently in stories about male heroes, especially the travelling variety such as Odysseus. In such stories, the female figures are events that happen to the hero, adventures in which he is involved. The women are static, the hero dynamic. He experiences the adventure and moves on through a landscape that is a landscape of women as well as one of geographical features. This kind of story is still very much with us, as anyone who has read the James Bond stories, Henry Miller or, closer to home, Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man* can testify. There are few female literary adventures of this kind. One might call them adventuresses, and the connotation alone indicates how they differ from the male variety. A man who recites a catalogue of women, such as Don Giovanni, is held to be a rogue, perhaps, but a rather enviable one, whereas female characters, from Moll Flanders to Isadora Wing, of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying,* are not allowed to do the same thing without a great deal of explanation, suffering and guilt.

I have mentioned the Solitary Weeper, that passive female victim to whom everything gets done and whose only activity is running away. There are male figures of a similar type but they are usually children, like Dickens's Paul Dombey, Oliver Twist and the suffering pupils of Dotherboys Hall. For the grown-up male to exhibit these characteristics – fearfulness, inability to act, feelings of extreme powerlessness, tearfulness, feelings of being trapped and helpless – he has to be crazy or a member of a minority group. Such feelings are usually viewed as a violation of his male nature, whereas the same feelings in a female character are treated as an expression of hers. Passive helpless men are aberrations; passive women within the range of the norm. But powerful, or at any rate, active heroes and villains are seen as the fulfilment of a *human* ideal; whereas powerful women, and there are many of them in literature, are usually given a supernatural aura. They are witches, Wonder Women or Grendel's mothers. They are monsters. They are not quite human. Grendel's mother is worse than Grendel because she is seen as a greater departure from the norm. Grendel, after all, is just a sort of Beowulf, only bigger and hungrier.

Suppose, however, that I want to create a female character who is not a natural force, whether good or evil; who is not a passive Solitary Weeper; who makes decisions, performs actions, causes as well as endures events, and has perhaps even some ambition, some creative power. What stories does my culture have to tell me about such women? Not very many at the public school level, which is probably the reason why I can remember nothing at all about Dick and Jane, although some vague imprints of Puff and Spot still remain. But, outside school hours, there were the comic books: Batman and Robin, Superman (and Louis Lane, the eternal dumb rescuee), the Human Torch and Zorro and many others, all male. Of course, there was Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman was an Amazon princess who lived on an island with some other Amazons but no men. She had magic bullet-deflecting bracelets, a transparent airplane, a magic lasso, and super skills and powers. She fought crime. There was only one catch – she had a boyfriend. But, if he kissed her, her superhuman strength disappeared like Samson's after a clean shave. Wonder Woman could never get married and still remain Wonder Woman.

Then there was *The Red Shoes* – not the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale but the movie, starring Moira Shearer, with beautiful red hair. A whole generation of little girls were taken to see it as a special treat for their birthday parties. Moira Shearer was a famous dancer but alas, she fell in love with the orchestra conductor, who, for some reason totally obscure to me at the time, forbade her to dance after they got married. This prohibition made her very unhappy. She wanted the man, but she wanted to dance as well, and the conflict drove her to fling herself in front of a train. The message was clear. You could not have both your artistic career and the love of a good man as well, and if you tried, you would end up committing suicide.

Then there were Robert Graves's poetic theories, set forth in many books, especially *The White Goddess,* which I read at the age of 19. For Graves, man does, woman simply is. Man is the poet, woman is the Muse, the White Goddess herself, inspiring but ultimately destroying. What about a woman who wants to be a poet? Well, it is possible, but the woman has to somehow *become* the White Goddess, acting as her incarnation and mouthpiece, and presumably behaving just as destructively. Instead of 'create and be destroyed,' Graves's pattern for the female artist was 'create and destroy.' A little more attractive than jumping in front of a train, but not much. Of course, you could always forget the whole thing, settle down and have babies. A safer course, it would seem, and that was certainly the message of the entire culture.

The most lurid cautionary tales provided by society, however, were the lives of actual female writers themselves. Women writers could not be ignored by literary history, at least not nineteenth-century ones. Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were too important for that. But their biographies could certainly emphasize their eccentricities and weirdness, and they did. Jane Austen never got married. Neither did Emily Bronte, who also died young. Charlotte Bronte died in childbirth. George Eliot lived with a man she was not married to and never had any children. Christina Rossetti 'looked at life through the wormholes in a shroud.' Emily Dickinson lived behind closed doors and was probably nuts. Elizabeth Barrett Browning did manage to squeeze out a child but did not bring him up properly and indulged in seances. These women were writers, true, but they were somehow not women, or if they were women, they were not *good* women. They were bad role models, or so their biographies implied.

'I used to have a boyfriend who called me Wonder Woman,' says Broom Hilda, the witch, in a recent comic strip.

'Because you are strong, courageous and true?' asks the Troll.

'No, because he wondered if I was a woman.'

If you want to be good at anything, said the message, you will have to sacrifice your femininity. If you want to be female, you'll have to have your tongue removed, like the Little Mermaid.

It's true that much was made of Poe's alcoholism, Byron's incest, Keats's tuberculosis, and Shelley's immoral behaviour, but somehow these romantic rebellions made male poets not only more interesting, but more male. It was rarely suggested that the two Emilys, Jane, Christina and the rest lived as they did because it was the only way they could get the time and develop the concentration to write. The amazing thing about women writers in the nineteenth century is not that there were so few of them but that there were any at all. If you think this syndrome is dead and buried, take a look at Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*. The central character is a successful woman writer, but it becomes obvious to her that she cannot write and retain the love of a good man. She chooses writing and throws an ashtray at the man, and at the end of the book she is living alone. Writers, male and female, have to be selfish just to get the time to write, but women are not trained to be selfish.

A much more extreme version of the perils of creativity is provided by the suicides of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton and the rather ghoulish attention paid to them. Female writers in the twentieth century are seen not just as eccentric and unfeminine, but as doomed. The temptation to act out the role of isolated or doomed female artist, either in one's life or through one's characters, is quite strong. Luckily, there are alternatives. When hard pressed, you can always contemplate the life of Mrs. Gaskell, Harriet Beecher Stowe or even, say, Alice Munro or Adele Wiseman or the many other female writers who seem to have been able to combine marriage, motherhood, and writing without becoming more noticeably deformed than anyone else in this culture.

However, there is some truth to the *Red Shoes* syndrome. It *is* more difficult for a woman writer in this society than for a male writer. But not because of any innate mysterious hormonal or spiritual differences: it is more difficult because it has been made more difficult, and the stereotypes still lurk in the wings, ready to spring fully formed from the heads of critics, both male and female, and attach themselves to any unwary character or author that wanders by. Women are still expected to be better than men, morally that is, even by women, even by some branches of the women's movement; and if you are not an angel, if you happen to have human failings, as most of us do, especially if you display any kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise, then you are not merely human, you're worse than human. You are a witch, a Medusa, a destructive, powerful, scary monster. An angel with pimples and flaws is not seen as a human being but as a devil. A character who behaves with the inconsistency that most of us display most of the time is not a believable creation but a slur on the Nature of Woman or a sermon, not on human frailty, but on the special frailer-than-frail shortcomings of all Womankind. There is still a lot of social pressure on a woman to be perfect, and also a lot of resentment of her should she approach this goal in any but the most rigidly prescribed fashion.

I could easily illustrate by reading from my own clipping file: I could tell you about Margaret the Magician, Margaret the Medusa, Margaret the Man-eater, clawing her way to success over the corpses of many hapless men. Margaret the power-hungry Hitler, with her megalomaniac plans to take over the entire field of Canadian Literature. This woman must be stopped! All of these mythological creatures are inventions of critics; not all of them male. (No one has yet called me an angel, but Margaret the Martyr will surely not take long to appear, especially if I die young in a car accident).

It would be amusing to continue with these excerpts, but it would also be rather mean, considering the fact that some of the perpetrators are, if not in the audience, employed by this university. So instead of doing that, I will enter a simple plea; women, both as characters and as people, must be allowed their imperfections. If I create a female character, I would like to be able to show her having the emotions all human beings have – hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear, as well as love, compassion, tolerance, and joy – without having her pronounced a monster, a slur, or a bad example. I would also like her to be cunning, intelligent and sly, if necessary for the plot, without having her branded as a bitch goddess or a glaring instance of the deviousness of women. For a long time, men in literature have been seen as individuals, women merely as examples of a gender; perhaps it is time to take the capital W off Woman. I myself have never known an angel, a harpy, a witch or an earth mother. I've known a number of real women, not all of whom have been nicer or more noble or more long-suffering or less self-righteous and pompous than men. Increasingly it is becoming possible to write about them, though as always it remains difficult for us to separate what we see from what we have been taught to see. Who knows? Even I may judge women more harshly than I do men; after all, they were responsible for Original Sin, or that is what I learned in school.

I will end with a quote from Agnes Macphail, who was not a writer but who was very familiar with at least one literary stereotype. 'When I hear men talk about women being the angel of the home, I always, mentally at least, shrug my shoulders in doubt. I do not want to be the angel of the home. I want for myself what I want for other women: absolute equality. After that is secured, then men and women can take their turns at being angels.' I myself would rephrase that: 'Then men and women can take their turns at being human, with all the individuality and variety the term implies.'

Reprinted from: *Women on Women.* Ann B. Shteir. (Ed.). The Gerstein Lecture Series 1975-6, York University. York University, 1978. pp. 13-26. With kind permission of Margaret Atwood and York University.

Fear of Flying

I disdained Wonder Woman, Juno,
Aphrodite
tracking instead new constellations
Frum, Carr and Kantaroff, Callwood, Hutchinson
LaMarsh and Flora, Livesay,
Laurence, Madeline Parent,
McGibbon, Jewett, expanding universe
yet some name me Icarus still
as though the steaming spiral
were choice to be avoided
I have clenched the sun in my teeth
apprentice phoenix
singe-edged but flying

Don't you remember schoolroom
studies of the lowly ant?
'the perfect social colony'
'each does his own task'
'Industrious Clean Orderly'
'If only mankind'
And didn't you aspire to be the Queen
the one with wings?
Victim perhaps, she
is allowed just one flight
before the workers eat her wings,

but to miss that . . .

Marsha Mitchell