

A Paler Shade of Green: Suburban Nature in Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye

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Article abstract

Critics of Canadian literature such as Cheryl Cowdy, Frank Davey, and Franca Bellarsi construe suburbia as existing somewhere in between the concrete jungle and the verdant wilderness. The ecocritical implications of this geographic and critical positioning, however, have not yet been thoroughly examined. Common images of suburbanites portray people in the "enclosed private worlds of fences, parlours and automobiles," cut off from their larger communities and environments in collective isolation. Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) depicts how this separate-from-nature culture is fostered. As Elaine Risley faces the repressed, traumatizing experiences of her childhood, she confronts her and her society's various interrelationships with the natural world, showing how a suburban upbringing can produce unsatisfactory relationships with both human and non-human nature. In so doing, *Cat's Eye* critiques common, urbane conceptions of nature from a point of view that is quintessentially ecocritical. Aside from the obvious environmental concerns vocalized by Elaine's biologist father, ecological issues are relevant to three other aspects of the novel: Elaine's early childhood in northern Ontario, her later summer vacations there, and the social pressures and cultural practices that Elaine experiences in suburbia. Through these elements of the narrative, *Cat's Eye* articulates some of the fundamental relationships with nature experienced by those living in suburban Canada and seeks to move beyond conventional portrayals of this relationship.

A Paler Shade of Green: Suburban Nature in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*

ROB ROSS

[I]n the dominant Euro-American culture, humans are not only distinguished from nature, but opposed to it in ways that make humans radically alienated from and superior to it. This polarisation, or "hyperseparation," often involves a denial of the real relationship of the superior term to the inferior.

— Greg Gerrard, *Ecocriticism* (28)

C RITICS OF CANADIAN LITERATURE such as Cheryl Cowdy, Frank Davey, and Franca Bellarsi construe suburbia as existing somewhere in between the concrete jungle and the verdant wilderness.¹ The ecocritical implications of this geographic and critical positioning, however, have not yet been thoroughly examined. Acknowledging "the broad range of cultural processes and products in which, and through which, the complex negotiations of nature and culture take place," Greg Gerrard states that the "widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (5). At ecocriticism's basis is a belief that the environment shapes humanity and vice versa, a belief that has direct relevance to critical conceptions of suburbia. Although some images of suburbanites portray people in the "enclosed private worlds of fences, parlours and automobiles" (Silverstone 5), cut off from their larger communities and environments in collective isolation, ecocriticism's main tenet provides a useful refutation of such constructions; even if a small and over-represented (clichéd) suburban demographic does live this way, an ecocritical ontology can "provide a needful corrective to modern culture's underrepresentation of the degree to which humanness is ecosystemically imbricated" (Buell 103). Although not exclusively a product of this setting, the hyperseparation from nature that Gerrard describes in dominant Euro-American society finds numerous correlations in suburban landscapes and culture. Recognized

as a “suburban *Künstlerromane*” (Cowdy 84), and often discussed for its realistic portrayal of childhood bullying (Jones 31; Massoura 211), Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* (1988) also demonstrates how suburbia has helped to foster the separate-from-nature culture described by Gerrard. As Elaine Risley faces the repressed, traumatizing experiences of her childhood, she confronts her and her society’s various interrelationships with the natural world, showing how a suburban upbringing can produce unsatisfactory relationships with both human and non-human nature. In so doing, *Cat’s Eye* critiques common, urbane conceptions of nature from a point of view that is quintessentially ecocritical.

Mostly set in the sprawling metropolis of Toronto but tinged with Atwood’s characteristic environmental concerns,² *Cat’s Eye* is an ideal novel from which to further develop ecocritical approaches to the city and suburbia. Critics such as Cheryl Cowdy, Robert Fulford, and Amy Lavender Harris all note how ravines are prominent in Atwood’s Toronto novels, in which they feature as sites of violence and represent varying types of individual and collective subconscious, but *Cat’s Eye* has a considerably larger scope when it comes to questions of nature. Aside from the obvious environmental concerns vocalized by Elaine’s biologist father,³ ecological issues are relevant to three other aspects of the novel: Elaine’s early childhood in northern Ontario, her later summer vacations there, and the social pressures and cultural practices that Elaine experiences in suburbia. Through these elements of the narrative, *Cat’s Eye* articulates some of the fundamental relationships with nature experienced by those living in suburban Canada and seeks to move beyond conventional portrayals of this relationship.

Given Atwood’s international prominence and her thematization of nature in works such as *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), *Surfacing* (1972), and *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), portions of her oeuvre have long been discussed in ecocritical contexts. *Cat’s Eye*, however, has not received the same kind of eco-scrutiny.⁴ The lack of discussion regarding representations of nature in the novel is largely the result of the traditional focus of ecocriticism on nature poetry and wilderness narratives⁵ — genres exemplified in Atwood’s early work. Further discouraging ecocritical analysis of the novel is critics’ tendency to see Atwood representing the city and wilderness as two opposing entities. For example, Branko Gorjup finds that Atwood’s “most common settings are the primordial Canadian wilderness . . .

and the artificial urban enclosures” of cities (8). Reading the urban as artificial and nature as primordial in *Cat’s Eye*, however, overlooks how the novel attempts to connect the two categories and problematize their mutual independence. Recently, H. Louise Davis has argued that “all of Atwood’s works” can “be considered, if not radically ecofeminist, at least ecofeminist friendly” (82). Many critics recognize elements in the novel applicable to feminist discussions. How Atwood’s ecological views tie into the novel’s more sociologically oriented themes deserves attention.

Several ecocritics note that the privileging of wilderness over civilization generates a problematic separation between humanity and nature. As Gerrard explains regarding narratives that represent self-rejuvenation through contact with wild places,

the ideal wilderness space is wholly pure by virtue of its independence from humans, but the ideal wilderness narrative posits a human subject whose most authentic existence is located precisely there. This model not only misrepresents the wild, but also exonerates us from taking a responsible approach to our everyday lives. (78)

In a similar vein, Buell identifies this contradiction as falling into “doublethink” (67). As ecocritics become increasingly aware of the extent to which monolithic concepts such as “nature” and “wilderness” connote both real places and human constructs, “The challenge for ecocritics is to keep one eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse” (Gerrard 10). The incorporation of this twofold awareness of “nature,” and the recognition of the field’s earlier problematic conceptualizations of terms such as “wilderness,” have led to what Buell calls “second-wave ecocriticism,” in which the dichotomy between what is “natural” and what is “built” is challenged (22), as is the exclusive equation of “the environment” with “nature” (24). In accordance with such thinking, the term *anthropocene* has become increasingly used to describe how human activities have come to outpace so-called natural processes in shaping the environment in our current era. Paul J. Crutzen explains, “Because human activities have also grown to become significant geological forces, for instance through land use changes, deforesta-

tion and fossil fuel burning, it is justified to assign the term 'anthropocene' to the current geological epoch" (13). The impact of humanity on the global environment since the beginning of the anthropocene demonstrates how humanity and nature are inextricably intertwined; yet, as Gerrard explains, dominant Euro-American culture persists in presenting humankind as opposed or superior to nature. *Cat's Eye* offers both a depiction of how this hyperseparation occurs through its portrayal of suburban Canadian society and tentative steps in moving beyond this problematic dynamic.

The Nature of Suburbia

Since the eighteenth century, green space has been integral to suburban design because suburbia presented an image of life closer to nature. Addressing the appearance of bourgeois enclaves outside Enlightenment-era London, Robert Fishman notes how access to green space was one of suburbia's primary appeals: "[Suburbia's] power derived ultimately from the capacity of suburban design to express a complex and compelling vision of the modern family . . . restored to harmony with nature" (x). Lewis Mumford similarly finds that the suburb "has demanded an enlargement of the areas of open green and garden" for the bourgeois idealization "of the unfettered suburban life, lived according to nature" (488, 486). Suburbia has consistently been perceived as rectifying "the tension between city and wilderness" (Lindstrom and Bartling xx) and offering "the consummate hybrid of the urban and the wild green worlds" (Teague 158). Yet, when one considers how the popularity of manicured lawns has reduced plant diversity in heavily suburbanized regions,⁶ how squirrels, raccoons, and skunks are commonly viewed as pests, and how fiercer animals such as bears, cougars, and moose are regularly removed from urban places for the obvious danger that they pose,⁷ it is clear that much of the nature found in the supposed wilderness areas of the world is not welcome in suburbia.

The version of nature that most Canadians encounter in suburbia is a physical manifestation of an ideal that sanitizes nature's threatening and unpleasant elements, a construction developed from conceptions of wilderness popularized in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Theorists seeking to define ideas of nature and wilderness occasionally make a distinction between what John Rennie Short calls classical and romantic perspectives:

The classical perspective sees most significance in human action and human society. The creation of livable places and usable spaces is a mark of civilization. Human use confers meaning on space. Outside of society, wilderness is something to be feared, an area of waste and desolation. . . . For the romantics, in contrast, untouched spaces have the greatest significance; they have a purity which human contact tends to sully and degrade. Wilderness for romantics is a place to be revered, a place of deep spiritual significance and a symbol of an earthly paradise. (6)

In *Survival*'s influential chapter "Nature the Monster," Atwood identifies a similar distinction in the two major modes of representation that govern responses to nature in Canadian literature. The first mode (Short's "classical nature") represents nature as "actively hostile towards man" (54), what Atwood calls "the evil monster" (60). The other mode represents nature as a benevolent force (Short's "romantic nature"), what Atwood associates with "the Divine Mother" (63). According to Atwood, nature in its romantic modes is meant to elicit responses similar to those outlined by Short: "What you were 'supposed' to feel about Nature under the first mode [Burke's cult of the sublime] was awe at the grandeur of Nature; under the second [Wordsworthian romanticism], you were supposed to feel that Nature was a kind of Mother or Nurse who would guide man if he would only listen to her" (49-50). While sublime awe differs greatly from nurturing benevolence, the very idea that contact with wilderness or natural landscapes is desirable and beneficent to humanity is commonly associated with the British romantics. Thus, the idea of suburbia partaking of the benefits of the natural world is rooted in a romantic idealization of nature, albeit one that favours nurturing associations. As Canadian geographer Peter J. Smith recognizes, "In accordance with Romantic ideals, suburbs came to be associated with an environment that was both closer to nature, in a literal sense, and more 'natural,' meaning more in harmony with people's physical, social, and spiritual needs" (309). What these romantic idealizations often became in practice, however, is what Jonathan Bate describes as the picturesque.

In *The Song of the Earth* (2000), Bate defines the picturesque as a set of aesthetic principles governing the construction and appreciation of scenic landscapes, "the emphasis being on pleasing variety gathered into unity by a crowning feature such as ivy. Viewed thus, it is like a picture" (129). In accordance with the picturesque landscape being one

that is pleasing to behold, the viewer of the picturesque engages with nature as a form of recreation: "The admirer of picturesque scenery pretends to be submitting to the power of nature, but in fact she is taking something for herself from it" (132). Romantic poets advocated for humanity's reintegration with the natural world, but this advocacy often amounted to little more than people seeking pleasing aesthetic and recreational experiences. Whether in tree-lined parks or in aggressively manicured front gardens, such a picturesque approach to nature prevails in suburbia. Terrell Dixon notes a similar preference when examining subdivision advertisements:

We are all . . . bombarded with the notion that packaged nature is an acceptable, and in some ways preferable, substitute for the real thing; that the environment to which we should aspire today features man-made lakes and a golf course; that our master-planned and gated suburbs are, quite naturally and in more ways than one, a very light shade of green. (80)

Ultimately, these notions of packaged or picturesque nature do not account for the social and ecological impacts of urban dispersal or for the transformation of ecosystems when they are incorporated into suburban designs. Nonetheless, in countless subdivisions built across Canada and elsewhere, adherence to a packaged, picturesque nature has been asserted and imprinted onto various landscapes over the course of decades. *Cat's Eye* acknowledges this nature of suburbia and, by demonstrating parallels to how human nature is understood, seeks to offer a more integrated view of humanity and nature, for both categories are subject to processes of active selection and rejection.

The Nature of *Cat's Eye*

An ecocritical reading of *Cat's Eye* extends critical discussions of the novel by Roberta White and Fiona Tolan. White argues that "Elaine Risley . . . attains the imaginative power which . . . can transform life into art" (161). She achieves "what Atwood, in *Survival*, calls 'creative non-victimhood'" and survives as an artist by finding "the means to shape her most painful memories into works of art" (164), unlike the "paralyzed artist[s]" whom Atwood catalogues in Chapter 9 of *Survival* (177-94). White's reading of *Cat's Eye* through the *Survival* thesis can be extended to the novel's depictions of nature. In the chapter entitled

"Nature the Monster," Atwood associates creative non-victimhood with an approach to nature that is not overly romantic, gloomy, or destructive but emphasizes connection. "From Position Four [creative non-victimhood], man himself is seen as part of the process," Atwood writes (63). In this context, Elaine's elevation to non-victimhood also involves understanding her connections to nature. As Atwood points out in this chapter, "attitudes towards Nature inevitably involve man's attitude towards his own body and towards sexuality, insofar as these too are seen as part of Nature" (63). In a similar fashion, Elaine's changing attitudes toward nature throughout *Cat's Eye* involve her changing attitudes toward her own body and sexuality, offering multiple correlations between her understanding of nature and her various senses of self.

Looking at how nature informs Elaine's sense of self also complements Tolan's feminist reading of the novel: "With *Cat's Eye*, Atwood produces a text that begins to bridge the gap between the bodily essentialism of the feminisms of the 1970s and the acculturated body that predominated in the 1990s" (175). Looking at how discourses of fashion and consumerism acculturate the female body in the novel, Tolan asserts that "the boundary between artifice and reality is indeterminable" (187). *Cat's Eye* represents the boundary between "natural" wilderness and the "artificial" city as equally indeterminable. How Elaine experiences her femininity and how she experiences nature are similar: both femininity and nature are subjected to various social constructs and acts of selection. These social constructs seek to repress certain facets of both categories in a comparable manner. Deriving concepts of the body from Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Tolan finds that "*Cat's Eye* plays out a tension between the social expression of the classical body, and the lived experience of the grotesque body" (188). Distinguishing between these two types of body, Tolan explains that "the grotesque body is the lived reality behind the acculturated classical body, and it is in its repression by the social order that it comes to resemble what Freud termed the unconscious and Kristeva called the semiotic" (188). According to Tolan, "the opposing states of the semiotic and the symbolic" described by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) "roughly correlate to Bakhtin's grotesque and classical bodies, and to Freud's unconscious and conscious states" (82). Similar to Freud's view of consciousness as repressing unconscious desires, Kristeva's "symbolic is a state of perpetual repression of the

semiotic" (83). The semiotic, however, "is never eliminated, and when it surfaces . . . it produces an 'abject' response, that is, disgust. . . . Abjection is the reaction to anything that recalls the corporeality of the body or which blurs the boundary between 'I' and 'other'" (83). Using Kristeva's language, Tolan maintains that "Images of abjection permeate the text in its mixture of clean and unclean" (194), and she postulates that the ravine is a "textual symbol of the semiotic" that "disrupts the consciously structured suburban world" (195). What Tolan does not address specifically is how experiences of nature in places such as the ravine imply that parts of nature are subjected to processes of semiotic repression as well. If White is correct in seeing Elaine as achieving the creative non-victimhood that Atwood articulates in *Survival*, and if part of that achievement is seeing oneself as being part of natural processes, then Elaine must blur the conventional boundary "between 'I' and 'other'" that exists between humanity and nature: that is, Elaine must learn to accept the repressed and abject within herself as well as in nature and, in the process, reject the picturesque vision of nature that proliferates in suburbia.

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine experiences a gradual separation from nature over the course of her life, one that is mirrored in her relationship to her childhood landscape of northern Ontario. Occupying abandoned logging camps, roadside motels, and cabins, with stints in cities such as North Bay and Sudbury (24), her childhood is literally all over the map, and she calls her family "nomads" (26). Her childhood relationship with nature reflects an awareness of porosity between the "fertile wilderness" and humanity. Describing the post-lunch ritual of defecating in the woods, Elaine notes how "there are other pieces of toilet paper there already" (23), making it clear that, though the Risleys rarely encounter other people, this landscape, in fact, bears human traces. Tolan recognizes that "Elaine's early childhood is largely spent in the wilderness" and argues that "this period functions as a pastoral retreat from society" (175), but Atwood complicates northern Ontario's identity as wilderness by having Elaine repeatedly draw attention to this landscape's human presences. Human involvement in the natural landscape is emphasized by Elaine's description of burying her own toilet paper "under sticks and bark" (23). Her "father says you should make it look as if you haven't been there at all" (23). The key words that qualify this passage are "make it look," for this is not a wilderness devoid of humanity.

Elaine's nomadic childhood undercuts the sense of "hyperseparation" from nature that Gerrard uses to describe Western society. Her father might encourage her to minimize environmental impacts, but her recollections demonstrate an inevitable interconnectivity.

Elaine retains her sense of ecological imbrication during her early years in suburbia, an awareness articulated through wood and wood products imagery. She notes that, though the country roads of her childhood are mostly empty, "once in a while there's a truck loaded with cut tree trunks and fresh lumber" (23). In Toronto, Elaine sees where this lumber ends up: the floors of the Risleys' unfinished house are "made of wide, rough boards with cracks in between" (33), and later she describes burning "scrap pieces of wood left over from construction" (35). Similar wood imagery is found in descriptions of the Zoology Building, where Dr. Risley works: "Inside it there are long hallways with hardwood floors, stained and worn from generations of students. . . . There are staircases, also of wood, which creak when we climb them" (37). Nature's transformation into city forms is shown in both Elaine's new home and the Zoology Building. As corridor upon corridor reveals "jars full of dead lizards or pickled ox eyeballs" (37), Elaine notes how the "general arrangements, though not the details, are familiar to us" (38). This familiarity extends to "the building" itself. Not only is the presence of animals in sterile jars familiar to her through her father's previous research in logging country, but the presence of wood, in various altered forms, is also familiar. In this context, Elaine experiences a sense of transition or, more accurately, transformation between the natural world and the suburban one. Cowdy describes the existence of "natural" ravines within the "artificial" landscape of Elaine's suburbia as troubling "the natural/artificial dichotomy," exposing the flawed duality of "self and landscape" (84). Indeed, Elaine's early sense of the built landscape of suburbia is not one of artificiality at all: it is one in which elements of the natural world are adapted for human use.

Elaine's sense of interconnectedness with nature gradually erodes over time, an ontological shift reflected in her summers back in northern Ontario. During these vacations, Elaine increasingly experiences a working landscape as a recreational one. On her first return trip, upon reaching "the first lakes," she does not emphasize the north's natural elements as much as the presence of industry (68). Noting "sawmills," "smokestacks," and "heaps of blackened slag," Elaine greets these indus-

trial features "as if they are home" (68). A similar emphasis on resource extraction is also found in the Risleys' vacation practices. Staying in an abandoned logging camp, Elaine describes activities such as catching fish (69) and picking blueberries for "blueberry puddings, blueberry sauce, [and] canned blueberries" (71). These images indicate that this vacation up north is not merely one of leisure but also one of sustenance harvesting.

Later summer vacations show Elaine's experiences becoming more recreational and ambivalent. On the second trip, Elaine notes her alienation from this landscape and its people. Regarding the presence of three "Indians" beside the road on the drive up, a reference to a famous Hugh Garner story,⁸ she thinks, "I have no claim on them, or any of this" (152). What once felt like home to her is now a place where she feels that she does not belong. The practices of her family alter as well. Elaine still gathers berries for her mother to make jelly (155), but the Risleys have ceased to fish (154), and they stay in a rented cabin, apart from industrial activity (153). On the third excursion, working and harvesting practices are entirely eliminated. Instead, Elaine focuses on letters from Cordelia and her brother (human-to-human interactions) as well as leisure activities and a sense of boredom: "I feel as if I'm marking time. I swim in the lake provided, and eat raisins and crackers spread thickly with peanut butter and honey while reading detective stories, and sulk" (237). On her final trip to northern Ontario, this time through it on her way to Vancouver, what was once a landscape of mines and logging operations is now exclusively determined by its natural elements, "hundreds of miles of scraggy forests and granite outcrops, hundreds of small blue anonymous lakes edged with swamp and bulrushes and dead spruce" (398). "This looks like emptiness and silence," Elaine explains, "but to me it is not empty, not silent. Instead it's filled with echoes" (399). For her, this natural landscape, once defined by its various human presences, is now one of unpopulated nostalgia. The connections between nature and humanity and the various interdependencies that exist between the two categories have eroded from her awareness.

In Vancouver, Elaine's sense of nature is unreal, abetted by "the greeting-card mountains, of the sunset-and-sloppy-message variety" (14). Such descriptions figure Elaine as a spectator of Vancouver's nature, unlike those of her early life in northern Ontario. She describes west coast nature as "all that stagey scenery" (43). Her upbringing might

have provided numerous opportunities to foster a sense of ecological imbrication in her life, but her adulthood is devoid of such perceptions, as here her understanding of natural landscapes has been sterilized of its grittier aspects, leaving only picturesque, greeting card associations. This view of nature as scenery, however, is not so much inherent to the west coast as it is to her perspective on it. Back in Toronto, Elaine supposes that the mountains and houses of the west coast “are as real, and as oppressive, to the people who grew up there as this place is to me. But on good days it still feels like a vacation” (15). The lack of personal context and history allows her to view Vancouver’s environs as a vacation landscape. Such a perception persists for Elaine even though the same industrial processes that defined her early childhood are also found in Vancouver: “Go a few miles here, a few miles there, out of sight of the picture windows, and you come to the land of stumps” (43-44). An opportunity exists here for her to see continuity between her adult home and her childhood home, but she fails to do so. Her relationship with her childhood landscapes shows this gradual shift in her perceptions. Her immersion in suburban Toronto demonstrates how this alteration occurred.

Ideas of nature in Toronto greatly differ from the more holistic ones that Elaine learns in early childhood from her parents. Addressing the impact of the Risleys’ move to suburbia, Tolan notes how, “when they re-enter civilisation by moving to suburban Toronto, Elaine and her family must quickly learn or re-learn their socially acceptable roles” (175). Elaine learns what is socially acceptable from her peer group through the games that they play and by being bullied. White notes how, being from “the wilderness,” Elaine “has no inkling of the world of girls, with their role playing as housewives or figures of fashion and their different rules of behaviour,” making her “an easy target” of ridicule (168). Her entry into suburbia is a rude awakening to social standards of acceptability as they exist in the city, for in “a conformist society . . . one is judged according to adherence to rules” (Wilson 183). In this social context, nature’s grittier elements are disparaged and, when taken to extremes, considered repulsive. A mild example in *Cat’s Eye* is Carol’s reaction to “the snakes and the turtles” found in the Zoology Building: “she makes a noise that sounds like ‘Ew,’ and says she wouldn’t want to touch them” (53). Carol’s response productively contrasts with that of Elaine, who has “been discouraged from having such feelings”

(53). A similar disparity in perception can be seen in Elaine's first encounter with Cordelia. When the girls first meet in the Risleys' yard, Elaine becomes immediately "conscious of [her own] grubbiness [and] unbrushed hair" (74). This sense of dirtiness that Cordelia's presence imposes on Elaine is mirrored in their first conversation:

"There's dog poop on your shoe," Cordelia says.

I look down. "It's only a rotten apple."

"It's the same color though, isn't it?" (75)

Cordelia imposes a view of natural process that emphasizes scatological associations: natural things such as rotten apples, or unbrushed hair, are rendered obscene because of their associations with filth. What Elaine experiences in this scene, and what Cordelia imposes during this encounter, are forms of abjection toward nature and toward Elaine herself. Kristeva describes abject experience as the loathing of "an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung," implying that experiences of abjection can be fairly broad in scope, and goes on to describe abjection as the "repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, muck" (2). Elaine's experiences of suburbia increasingly show such an approach to nature's dirtier elements being incorporated into her life, revealing exclusionary values regarding nature that circulate in larger society.

The disparaging, abject approach to certain elements within nature is reflected in the treatment of the ravine. Early descriptions of this landscape in *Cat's Eye* emphasize its dirtiness. As the girls descend the dirt path to the footbridge, Elaine takes note of the garbage there: "empty liquor bottles tossed into this thicket, and pieces of Kleenex. One day we find a safe [a condom]. . . . Carol says 'Ew'" (79). Similarly, the ravine's stream is characterized by its use as a dumping ground. "[W]e can see the junk people have dumped into it," Elaine says, "the worn-out tires, the broken bottles and rusty pieces of metal" (79). This site is not one of pristine nature free of human intervention but one devalued with refuse. Even its natural flora are considered undesirable: "Along the edge of the path is a thicket of weeds: goldenrod, ragweed, asters, burdocks, deadly nightshade" (79). Regarding nightshade, Elaine later explains that you "pull it out of the garden and throw it away" (113). The accumulation of these images construes the ravine as a site of the discarded and unvalued, but these rejected elements have not

disappeared; what is excluded persistently remains. Kristeva's famous example of the abject is the corpse: "It is death infecting life, . . . something rejected from which one does not part, . . . [and it] disturbs identity, system order" (4). In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine experiences the ravine in such a potentially threatening fashion, as a site of the excluded that nonetheless has the potential to contaminate. Cordelia says that the ravine water is "made of dissolved dead people" and that, "if you drink it or step into it or even get too close to it, the dead people will . . . take you with them" (79).

While undesirable elements of nature are made abject in suburbia, other elements of the natural world are valued for their useful and aesthetic properties. For example, Elaine notes how at Cordelia's home "[t]here are real flowers, several different kinds at once, in chunky, flowing vases of Swedish glass" (75). Similarly, the Smeath residence is defined for Elaine by its solitary rubber plant, forbidden to be touched by the girls but delicately "wiped off leaf by leaf with milk" to ensure its survival (60). In both cases, natural elements are removed from their ecological contexts and used for display through careful maintenance. In contrast, such aesthetic practices differ in Elaine's house. Whereas Elaine says that Cordelia's mother "arranges the flowers herself," she notes that her own "mother doesn't" (75). Mrs. Risley picks weeds from the ravines or side of the road because she "would never think of spending money on flowers" and plops them into vases without much consideration (75). The difference that Elaine sees between these mothers' flower arrangements highlights two contrasting approaches to nature: Mrs. Risley uses local flowers to decorate her house, creating a clear connection between the natural world and its aesthetic presentation; in contrast, the aesthetic greenery found in Elaine's friends' houses is removed from any such context and is noticeably altered or arranged.

Akin to the process through which Kristeva describes the abjection of self, the lives of Elaine's friends are "based on exclusion" (Kristeva 6). Elaine comes to internalize a selective valuing of nature that circulates in her larger society, most notably through her sense of self as a gendered being and the natural cycles of her own body. Newly immersed in a society of suburban girls, she finds a different set of social expectations than when she played with her brother: "I don't have to keep up with anyone, run as fast, aim as well. . . . All I have to do is sit on the floor and cut frying pans out of the *Eaton's Catalogue* with embroidery

scissors, and say I've done it badly" (57). Atwood often incorporates humour into such descriptions through the ironic distancing that occurs from Elaine's older self narrating such passages, but this irony does not contradict young Elaine's experience of events; it calls attention to the absurdity of what entails socially acceptable human nature. As Tolan posits, "Through the games that the girls play, Atwood examines the extent to which the consumer fantasy of femininity is internalised by the female" (186). How Elaine contrasts this more aesthetic re-use of the *Eaton's Catalogue* here with its re-use up north "as toilet paper" (56) again highlights differing practices between country and city regarding issues of use versus display. In this scene, the old catalogue, another wood products image, is also being used to show the transformation of Elaine's sense of self through a new set of gender expectations, offering a parallel between the transformation of natural products when incorporated into the human-built environment and the transformation of human nature in this landscape.

The gender expectations that Elaine encounters are shown to generate anxiety as a result of self-abjection, which Kristeva says "is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*" (5). When one seeks to identify positively with elements of the outside world, and when what is "other" is discovered not only to be revolting but also to be part of "I," self-abjection is experienced. In *Cat's Eye*, the narration links Elaine's experiences of self-abjection to the community's selective approach to nature. After Cordelia's sisters hit puberty and start waxing their legs and revealing such mysteries as "the curse," the sense of impending physical change, as Elaine says, "frightens us. Whatever has happened to them, bulging them, softening them . . . whatever it is, it may happen to us too" (97). Of course, "whatever it is" is puberty and will unavoidably happen to them. Seeking to identify with older girls, Elaine fails, but what she fears about aging and what makes it difficult to identify with older girls and women are in fact lurking within her. In depicting this anxiety among girls concerning puberty and sex and its general perception as something dirty, Elaine uses pronouns such as "we" and "us," indicating a shared experience and her growing alignment with a selective perception of what constitutes nature. Elaine might have seen beetles and dragonflies "flying around, stuck together,"

in northern Ontario and even know the term “mating” from her father’s biology diagrams, but when she tries to imagine Mr. and Mrs. Smeath similarly stuck together such “an image, even without the addition of flight, will not do” (99). Her childhood ecological awareness could have enabled her to take the fundamentals of human reproduction to their logical conclusions, but, at this point in the narrative, the young Elaine has internalized her society’s sense of anxiety and separation from nature regarding sexual matters. Significantly, these anxieties are depicted in the novel’s section titled “Deadly Nightshade,” connecting the undesirability of certain plants in suburbia to the undesirability of certain elements of human nature being openly acknowledged.

Elaine’s crumbling ecological awareness is shown to be the product of differing values toward nature internalized through her socialization in suburbia. The result is that, by the time Elaine is an adult, she has no sense of ecological imbrication at all, a consequence reflected in the absence of nature themes in the sections of the novel that deal with her college years. White explains that “Elaine’s life in the 1960s and 1970s shows the growth of an artist in the social contexts of those times” (170). In conducting an ecocritical reading of a text that does not easily lend itself to questions of environment and nature, Buell argues that the “environmental(ist) subtexts of works whose interests are ostensibly directed elsewhere (e.g., towards social, political, and economic relations) may be no less telling in this regard than cases of the opposite sort” (29). Given the thematic emphasis that nature receives in the early sections of *Cat’s Eye*, its absence in the latter parts of the text is indeed telling: this absence is a reflection of Elaine’s diminished interest in ecological considerations and her concept of herself as a being separate from the natural world. Reinforcing such an interpretation, when Elaine gets pregnant, she feels her body to be utterly foreign to her identity. “It has betrayed me, and I am disgusted with it,” she writes (358). Discussing Atwood’s female bodies, Madeleine Davies notes how “fractured or disrupted psyches result in alienated bodies that become sinister enemies even to their inhabitants” (58). The pregnancy forces Elaine and Jon to confront the abject truth that adulthood is now inevitable: “We thought we were running away from the grown-ups, and now we are the grown-ups” (361). The gradual drift from a sense of interrelation with nature impedes Elaine’s ability to anticipate other possible ecological stages of her life, such as pregnancy and parenthood. Ironically, when

her destructive relationship with Jon culminates in her departure from inner-city Toronto, Elaine flees to a suburban landscape similar to that of her childhood. The move back to the suburbs is a departure to various forms of stability, further reflecting the internalization of suburban ideals in her identity.

Describing her life in Vancouver, Elaine clearly situates herself within a suburban, middle-class demographic: "I live in a house, with window curtains and a lawn" (14). Similarly, when she misses Vancouver, what she yearns for is sitting "in front of the fireplace with Ben, looking out over the harbor, while the giant slugs munch away at the greenery in the back garden" (89). Elaine's Vancouver, though not explicitly stated as such, is shaped by images of the suburban good life — greenery, scenery, and leisure — combined into an ideal form of living that communicates a sense of stability. These characteristically suburban values and pleasures are reiterated when Elaine describes her relationship with her second husband, Ben: "He comes over and fixes my back porch with his own saw and hammer, as in women's magazines of long ago, and has a beer afterward, on the lawn, as in ads" (403). White describes Ben as the "most dependable, attractive male in any of Atwood's novels" (171), but she overlooks the fact that his characterization is derived from stylized constructions of masculinity circulating in postwar magazines and advertisements (perhaps ones found in the *Eaton's Catalogue*). These are the same magazines that feature prominently in the cut-and-paste games of Elaine's childhood, which examine how "the consumer fantasy of femininity is internalised by the female" (Tolan 186). Atwood shows consumer fantasies of masculinity to be similarly internalized. Ben's idealized character is derived from such magazines, and the values of ownership, do-it-yourself, and leisure that these magazines promoted are now, ironically, Elaine's reality.

The sense of continuity with variation between her suburban childhood and adult life is also found in the suburbia that Elaine confronts in her return to Toronto: "inside [the houses], the benjaminia trees and tropical climbers have taken over, ousting the mangy African violets once nurtured on kitchen windowsills" (408). Tellingly, Elaine compares herself to such an interior plant when describing her relationship with Ben: "I need to be cared for, like a potted plant. A little pruning, a little watering, a little weeding and straightening up, to bring out the best in me" (403-04). Like the Smeaths' rubber plant, Cordelia's moth-

er's flower arrangements, and the garden weeding of her own parents, Elaine's adult life with Ben is a manicured one, devoid of "unsavory truths" (403). Mature adulthood for Elaine is presented in the same way that nature itself is presented in suburbia: both are denied their more abject elements. In this manner, *Cat's Eye* shows considerable cultural continuity between Elaine's childhood and her adult suburban life.

Both Elaine's evolving identity and her sense of nature grow steadily more picturesque, and the two categories of humanity and nature grow steadily more separate. Near the end of the novel, however, Elaine reflects on the environmental disasters that her father once discussed and recognizes the disjunction between herself and the environmental issues that he articulated: "I remember sitting at the dinner table, with Cordelia, his warnings washing over our heads. . . . We thought they were boring then, a form of adult gossip that did not concern us. Now it's all come true, except worse" (418). Although Elaine discounted her father's bleak warnings for various reasons over the years, she finds her way back to his perspective, believing that she now lives "in his nightmare" (418) given the increased environmental degradation that she has seen. Janine Rogers argues that, in "*Cat's Eye*, the female artist and male scientist are not adversaries but allies: 'see-ers,' who construct maps, models, and 'life-drawings' for understanding our existence" (149). Part of her artistic journey, then, is reconciling her father's scientific, ecological point of view with her own as Elaine seeks to understand her life and the world in which she lives. What her ambivalent and changing relationship with her father's views points to, however, is an evolving understanding of and relationship with nature itself.

By the end of the novel, Elaine begins to realize that her perspectives on nature and herself share some similarities. Returning to her childhood ravine, she notices how "everything is pruned and civic" and how they have "cleaned up the junk. . . . [T]his is no longer an unofficial garbage dump but a jogger's route" (441, 442). Thus, while she has traded in the grittier nature of her childhood for the postcard scenery of Vancouver, and admits to "pruning" her identity in her life with Ben in the process, Toronto too has been busy transforming its green spaces into more pleasant places, but Elaine also shows the ability to move beyond seeing the ravine in human terms: "The bridge is only a bridge, the river a river, the sky is a sky. This landscape is empty now, a place for Sunday runners. Or not empty: filled with whatever it is by

itself, when I'm not looking" (443). She notes how what was once a site of the discarded is now a site of recreation, devoid of its own "unsavory truths." In so doing, she can separate the ravine from the traumatic experiences of her childhood, and she begins to see the ravine as a thing in itself, as having significance when not being viewed in human terms.⁹ Elaine starts to see the ravine as something that exists independently of human perception but nonetheless as something that is heavily shaped by human use. This sense of nature as being both a human construct and something that actually exists is precisely what Gerrard describes as the challenge of ecocritics (10).

Elaine's varying experiences of the ravine also echo Atwood's conception of nature in *Survival*. At first, the ravine is a site of danger, of mythical lurking men and garbage, only to become a site of trauma after Elaine's near drowning in its stream (200-03). In adulthood, Elaine experiences nature differently: it becomes a more benign entity through the west coast's postcard mountains and "unreal" scenery, also communicated in how the ravine in her suburban Toronto undergoes rehabilitation to become a clean, jogger-friendly landscape devoid of filth. In "Nature the Monster," after describing these two responses to nature that correspond to Elaine's in *Cat's Eye*, Atwood theorizes a more inclusive approach in which nature "exists as itself . . . as a living process which includes opposites: life and death, 'gentleness' and 'hostility'" (63). From this position associated with creative non-victimhood, "man himself is seen as part of the process; he does not define himself as 'good' or 'weak' as against a hostile Nature, or as 'bad' or 'aggressive' as against a passive, powerless Nature" (63). Such a response, which emphasizes ecological connectivity and multiple contradictory attributes, is precisely the sense of nature that Elaine acquires in her early childhood, and it is this ecological sense of the natural world that she reconnects with as she confronts her traumatic Toronto past. As Theodor Adorno writes in his chapter "Natural Beauty," in which he expounds on how nature is mediated through aesthetic principles similar to Bate's notion of the picturesque, "Consciousness does justice to the experience of nature only when . . . it incorporates nature's wounds" (68). In noting how her childhood ravine has undergone a process of active selection similar to that of her own identity, Elaine begins to embrace the grittier elements of both categories that have heretofore been repressed and made abject. In the ravine, she notes "[a]nother,

wilder and more tangled landscape rising up, from beneath the surface of this one" (441). This description applies equally to the ravine and her sense of self at the end of the novel. In seeing the similarities between humanity and nature, the hyperseparation collapses, allowing for the recognition of humanity's role in shaping nature.

Through Elaine's recollections of her childhood in northern Ontario, her later summer vacations there, and her socialization in suburbia, *Cat's Eye* invites an ecocritical perspective on Canada's suburban society and geography, reminding us that the "artificial," constructed world of cities is derived from nature. John Tallmadge writes, "Environmental problems ultimately stem from our values, beliefs, and ideas about the proper relations between human beings and nature. We will never solve [these problems] without understanding those beliefs" (4). Living in a heavily suburbanized nation (Bunting and Filion 12; R. Harris 6), Canadians consequently need to understand the beliefs regarding humanity and nature nurtured in suburbia as well as how these relations are forged in this locale. *Cat's Eye* is an ideal novel through which to do so, for it invites a comparison between acts of suburban landscaping and social values that seek to privilege aspects of humanity seen as desirable (beauty, feminine fragility, masculine DIY culture) while denying other aspects deemed unpleasant (social deviancy, bodily secretions, aging). In doing so, the novel suggests that constructions of nature shaped by the romantic and the picturesque have had a tremendous impact on suburban Canada and invites us to consider its various ecological imbrications as well as our own.

With some of the highest energy consumption per capita in the world (Olson 235), and purportedly the highest production of garbage per person ("Canadians"), Canadians need to re-evaluate their relationships with nature, particularly if these relationships emphasize romantic, picturesque fantasies that mask their environmental consequences. Through a wide swath of disciplines and studies, the ecological impacts of our dispersed urban culture need to be confronted and discussed as well. As a forum for discussion on how Canadians imagine themselves and their personal and collective identities, the study of Canadian literature should address our suburban culture ecocritically. According to Buell, "issues of vision, value, culture, and imagination are keys to today's environmental crises at least as fundamental as scientific research, technological know-how, and legislative regulation" (5). In a

nation that is partially defined by its abundance of natural resources and “wild” places — a definition that seems contradictorily to encourage the excessive consumption of resources — as well as by its abundance of suburban spaces, there are clearly some problems with how we collectively see ourselves and value our landscapes. *Cat's Eye* depicts nature in suburbia to suggest that romantic, picturesque approaches to nature are at the root of these problems.

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NOTES

¹ “Suburbia is *the* borderline par excellence between city and bush,” writes Cheryl Cowdy (71); Frank Davey, analyzing Atwood's use of Canadian suburbs, writes that such “spaces operate as transitional spaces between uncoded and therefore uninhabitable wilderness and oppressively coded cities” (97); and Franca Bellarsi, discussing the lack of suburban places in Canadian poetry, argues that suburbs are chiefly characterized by their “liminality” or “in-betweenness” (130).

² Shannon Hengen recognizes that “[e]nvironmentalism in the works of Atwood . . . becomes a concern with the urgent preservation of a human place in a natural world in which the term ‘human’ does not imply ‘superior,’ or ‘alone’” (74). Indeed, novels from *Surfacing* (1972) to *Oryx and Crake* (2003), not to mention poetry found in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), reflect this concern.

³ Dr. Risley's comments on issues such as genetically modified foods (138-40) and pollution (266-67, 307) show his concern with environmental degradation.

⁴ For example, other critics recognize how the novel is an early example of how Atwood problematizes concepts of home and nation (Rao), an exploration of “the relationship between the global city and the nation-state” (Chilton 47), an articulation of female subjectivity and female artistic vision in a male-dominated society (Cooke; Howells; Wilson), and a study of “the relations between the present, the past, and the functions of memory” (Palumbo 22).

⁵ As noted by ecocritic Lawrence Buell, for “ecocriticism to recognize ‘the city’ as something other than a non-place is itself a great and necessary advance” (88).

⁶ For a more thorough description of suburban sprawl's environmental impacts, see “Sprawl.”

⁷ Our “tolerance for wild creatures,” writes Amy Lavender Harris, “grudging at best, turns rapidly to revulsion or terror whenever they are perceived to threaten the sanctity of the urban sphere” (52).

⁸ “One-Two-Three Little Indians” calls attention to First Nations living conditions in

northern Ontario in contrast to Canada's white, urban, middle classes who use the landscape for summer recreation.

⁹ In one of the paintings chosen for her retrospective exhibition, Elaine also seeks to refute the sense of separation between humanity and nature. Her ekphrastic description of *Picoseconds*, a Group of Seven-style landscape (427), includes her parents making lunch in one corner of the canvas with gas pump logos of the 1940s "holding them up" (428). Elaine explains that the gas pump logos call "into question the reality of landscape and figures alike" (428). Curiously, other critics do not see *Picoseconds* as relating to concepts of nature (Howells 143; White 176).

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