

**UNIVERSITATEA "BABEȘ-BOLYAI" CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTATEA DE LITERE
ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ DE STUDII LINGVISTICE ȘI LITERARE**

TEZĂ DE DOCTORAT

**CAROL SHIELDS AND MARGARET ATWOOD:
THE QUEST OF FEMININE IDENTITY
SUMMARY**

**Conducător științific:
Prof. dr. Michaela Mudure**

**Doctorand:
Andreea-Gianina Bera**

**Cluj-Napoca
2019**

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	4
1. Introduction.....	5
2. Challenging Stereotypes: On Writers and Their Writing.....	12
2.1. Feminism, Society and Women Writers.....	12
2.2. The Authoress - Gazing at Life.....	26
2.2.1. The Act of Writing – An Atonement.....	26
2.2.2. The Biographer and the Poetess.....	33
2.3. Weaving Texts and Writing Lives.....	44
2.3.1. Writing Books and Forging Identities.....	46
2.3.2. The Silent Writer and Mother.....	54
3. Mothers and Daughters.....	67
3.1. Choosing Motherhood.....	70
3.2. Motherhood at Its Worst.....	73
3.3. Two Daughters and Their Mother.....	79
3.4. Coercing Motherhood.....	84
3.4.1. Fabricated Mothers and Unwanted Daughters.....	84
3.4.2. In the Dystopian Mood.....	93
3.5. The Helpless Mother.....	96
3.6. On Motherhood - Conclusions.....	99
4. Men and Women – Portraits and Relationships.....	101
4.1. Man and Woman.....	101
4.2. Young Women and Society.....	106
4.3. Husbands, Wives and Lovers.....	122
4.3.1. The Modern Woman and the Conventional Marriage.....	136
4.4. Woman on Masculinity.....	140
5. Discovering her Identity.....	145
5.1. She Is a Villainess.....	149
5.2. The Female Tormentor.....	155

5.3. Submitting to Norms – A Conventional Life.....159
5.4. She and Society.....164
6. Conclusions.....167
Bibliography.....173

Keywords: identity, femininity, masculinity, feminism, performativity, gender, women, men, society.

Summary

The present PhD thesis focuses on the comparative analysis of feminine identity in Carol Shields' and Margaret Atwood's works. The novels analysed in this thesis were written between 1969 and 2003.

Carol Shields was born in 1935 in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb in Chicago but lived most of her life in Canada. She died in 2003 of breast cancer. Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa and now lives in Toronto. These two women writers are part of the Canadian female literary tradition. The fictional universe created by Shields and Atwood is representative for the cultural scene of the second half of the twentieth century when feminism developed and woman's status was changing.

The theoretical corpus this research relies on includes scholars such as Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Andrea O'Reilly, Nancy Chodorow, and Rosi Braidotti. A very important theory for the understanding of feminine identity and the image of woman in society is Judith Butler's performative gender theory. She considers that masculine and feminine genders are social constructs, roles that the individual asserts according to the gender determined by society. Masculine and feminine genders imply attitudes, behaviours, and activities that are considered normal and different for the two genders. Gender is the repetition of social and cultural norms and conventions in an imposed and restrictive manner.

The notion of motherhood is an essential part of feminine identity. In order to understand motherhood I have used the work of Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow and Andrea O'Reilly. Controversial and complex, motherhood is essential in order to understand the evolution of woman's status. So we must differentiate between motherhood and mothering, i.e., the institution and mothering and the actual acting that makes one a mother. Adrienne Rich states that motherhood as institution is used by patriarchy to control women. Stepping in Rich's

footsteps, Andrea O'Reilly supports the idea that there is a need for feminism to centre on motherhood and use it in order to empower women.

After the introduction we have focused on the woman writer avatar in the chapter entitled "Challenging Stereotypes: On Writers and Their Writing". The act of writing and its symbols are of great importance both for Shields and Atwood. The first writer avatar we have analysed is Iris Chase Griffin from Atwood's novel *The Blind Assassin*. For her the act of writing is an atoning and freeing act. I continued with Judith, a biographer, and Charleen, a poetess, the two sisters from Shields' novel *Duet*. For them the act of writing is a process of self-discovery. Joan Foster, the main character from Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, is the next woman writer analysed in this chapter. For Joan, writing books, Costume Gothics, and forging new identities for herself are ways of escaping whatever trouble she finds herself in. Shields' Reta Winters, the writer from *Unless*, is the silenced writer whose work is still underestimated. Then there is Shields' Mary Swann, the murdered poetess whose figure is actually built up *in absentia* by her devotees. Atwood's and Shields' writers uncover the process of writing in its complexity and use it to explore their femininity and establish their own place in the world and history regardless the societal obstacles and prejudices.

The next chapter "Mothers and Daughters" centres on the idea of motherhood as an essential component of feminine identity. The archetypal relationship between mothers and daughters is essential for Atwood's and Shields' perception of woman. Society and the institution of motherhood with their norms and rules generated dysfunctional relationships between mothers and their offspring. Atwood exploited this dysfunctional side of motherhood in many of her novels. The unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* is forced to give up motherhood due to unfavourable circumstances which generate identity conflicts. Atwood also exposes the monstrous side of motherhood in *The Robber Bride*, *Lady Oracle*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*. These novels show women who are abusively coerced to mother children

(Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*) or they have to become mothers because of unfortunate conditions related to their marital status (Anthea, Tony's mother and Gloria, Karen's/Charis' mother from *The Robber Bride*, Joan's mother from *Lady Oracle*). These situations generate toxic and life-altering relationships between mothers and daughters.

Carol Shields' mothers (for example Reta Winters from *Unless*) choose and embrace motherhood and the comfort of domesticity, as limiting as these may be for their fulfilment as women. Motherhood, a social construct, an institution that, according to patriarchy, is meant to atone woman and give her value should be a matter of choice. As some of the Atwoodian mothers demonstrate, if it is not a matter of choice, motherhood, one of the most rewarding experiences of a woman's life, can have destructive effects on feminine identity.

In the next chapter ("Men and Women – Portraits and Relationships") I analyse masculinity and femininity, the two gender roles, as they are performed by the men and women from Carol Shields' and Margaret Atwood's novels. Women, as well as men, are social beings who are compelled to perform their gender in order to fit into the sphere of the normal and the acceptable. Men and women play their roles in a normative and regulating society. Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and *Bodily Harm* offer an image of a consumerist society in which individuals, men and women, are mere commodities meant to ensure the functioning of this well-ordered machine. Shields' Brenda and Jack Bowman from *Happenstance*, Tom Avery and Fay McLeod from *The Republic of Love*, are husbands and wives who tackle the institution of marriage as a limiting status accompanied by a certain degree of desired normalcy and comfort. Elizabeth and Nate Schoenhof from Atwood's *Life before Man* are a husband and a wife who deal with a marriage in transition that has a damaging effect on their identities.

Shields offers a glimpse into the emancipated side of the woman. The wife (Brenda) returns to the comfort of her family, of the domestic life. Atwood frees Nate and Elizabeth from the ties of a counterfeit and toxic marriage and lets them find their own path in life.

Marriage, like motherhood, is an institution meant to establish order and the hegemony of patriarchy and to suppress the individual. The two writers observe the husbands and wives and their identities struggling to emerge from under layers and layers of conventions and expectations.

The last chapter (“Discovering her Identity”) focuses on feminine identity as a dynamic process. Atwood prefers to create morally complex female characters. Such are the villainesses Grace Marks from *Alias Grace* and Zenia from *The Robber Bride*. Atwood shows, through these two women, a duplicitous and dark femininity. Grace, the murderess, fascinates through innocence and deviousness while Zenia, the temptress, troubles the lives of good women by freeing them from their worthless and manipulating husbands and lovers. Carol Shields has created morally considerate female characters, such as Daisy Goodwill Flett from *The Stone Diaries*. She is the motherless character who spends her lifetime conforming and adapting her femininity to a traditional milieu. Daisy ends up sculpting her life into a monument dedicated to patriarchy. Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* also covers feminine identity through Elaine. From a young age, she strived to define her feminine identity against a normative society.

The female characters analysed in the thesis were representative for the woman of the second half of the twentieth century. They were captured in their search for identity and examined in their evolution against a cultural environment and a society that were reconsidering the status of woman.

.Atwood’s representation of feminine identity starts with a young woman (Marian) who rejects her femininity because she considers it is stifling. Atwood continues with the unnamed character of *Surfacing* who has to return to a mystical state of communion with nature, with her femininity. The other Atwoodian female characters find the quest of their own feminine identity challenged by marriage, motherhood, society, and man.

Shields' approach to feminine identity is closely connected to the domestic milieu. Her female characters are set against the familial environment, they define their identity in relation to their statuses as wives and mothers. The quest of their feminine identity is also challenged by a constantly changing world that disrupts their balanced and conventional life. If Atwood's characters defy the rules of the society they live in and are not willing to obey restrictive norms, Shields' characters choose to continue living in the limiting safety offered by the social order. However, all these female characters, whether they choose to conform or not to conform to the norms, they stay truthful to their femininity.

Bibliography

Books

Atwood, Margaret. *Alias Grace*, Virago Press, 2009.

---. *Bodily Harm*. Vintage, 2007.

---. *Cat's Eye*, Virago Press, 2009.

---. *Curious Pursuits*. Virago Press, 2006.

---. *Lady Oracle*. Virago Press, 2009.

---. *Life before Man*. Vintage, 1996.

---. *Murder in the Dark*. Virago Press, 2010.

---. *On Writers and Writing*. Virago Press, 2003.

---. *Second Words*. Anansi, 1982.

---. *Surfacing*. McClelland and Stewart, 2010.

---. *The Blind Assassin*. Virago Press, 2009.

---. *The Edible Woman*. Virago Press, 2009.

---. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage Books, 2010.

---. *The Robber Bride*. Virago Press, 2009.

Bandici, Adina. "*Self*" *Tormented/Tormenting Characters in a Selection of Novels by*

Margaret Atwood. Editura Universității din Oradea, 2010.

Bennett, Donna and Russell Brown. *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*.

Oxford University Press, 1983.

Bloom, Harold. *Margaret Atwood*. Bloom's Literary Criticism, An Imprint of Infobase

Publishing, 2009.

---. *Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*. Bloom's Literary Criticism, An Imprint

of Infobase Publishing, 2004.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects*. <https://joacamillopenna.files.wordpress.com.pdf>,

Accessed 28 May 2017.

---. *The Posthuman*. <https://loomio-attachments.s3.amazonaws.com.pdf>, Accessed 28 May 2017.

Brennan, Teresa. *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1990.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. Routledge, 1993.

---. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 2002.

---. *Undoing Gender*. Routledge, 2004.

Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering*. University of California Press, 1979.

Frye, Northrop. *Divisions on a Ground – Essays on Canadian Culture*. Anansi, 1982.

---. *The Bush Garden - Essays on the Canadian Imagination*. Anansi, 1971.

Grace, Sherrill. *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text, and System*. University of British Columbia Press, 1983.

Guțu, Gheorghe. *Dicționar Latin-Român*. Editura Științifică București, 1969.

Hanțiu, Ecaterina Lia. *Pathways of the Mind through Time and Space: (Essays on British, American and Canadian literature)*. Editura Universității din Oradea, 1999.

Howells, Coral Ann. *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. Routledge, 2005.

Irimia, Florin. *The Postmodern Canadian Novel*. Universitas XXI, 2006.

Jardine, Alice and Paul Smith. *Men in Feminism*. Routledge, 1987.

Kroller, Eva-Marie. *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Lazăr, Andreea Catrinela. *Narratives of Singleness: Fluid Female Identities in*

- Postmodern Times*. Institutul European, 2013.
- McHale, Brian. *Constructing Postmodernism*. Routledge, 1992.
- Mitchell, Juliet and Ann Oakley. *Who's Afraid of Feminism?* Hamish Hamilton, 1997.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics; Feminist Literary Theory*. Routledge, 1991.
- Mudure, Michaela, *Canadian Readings*. NapocaStar, 2009.
- Nye, Andrea. *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man*, Routledge, 1989.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born*, W. W. Norton and Company, 1995.
- Shields, Carol. *Duet*. Harper Perennial, 2006.
- . *Happenstance*. Fourth Estate, 2003.
- . *Larry's Party*. Harper Perennial, 2006.
- . *Swann*. Fourth Estate, 2000.
- . *Stone Diaries*. World Editions, 1993.
- . *The Republic of Love*, Harper Perennial, 2006.
- . *Unless*. Fourth Estate, 2003.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Speaking of Gender*. Routledge, 1989.
- Șerban, Andreea. *The Call of the Wild: M/Other Nature in Margaret Atwood's Novels*.
NapocaStar, 2010.
- Tolan, Fiona. *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Rodopi, 2007.
- O'Reilly, Andrea and Silvia Caporale Bizzini. *From the Personal to the Political-
Toward a New Theory of Maternal Narrative*. Susquehanna University Press,
2010,
- Warhol, Robyn R. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*.
Rutgers University Press, 1993.

Articles and Interviews

Antip, Felicia, "Scriitoare scriind despre scriitoare scriind despre...Carol Shields –

Decât dacă" *Adevărul Literar și Artistic*, Vol.13, No.708 (Mar 2004), pp.15.

Atwood, Margaret, "A Soap Bubble Hovering Over the Void- A Tribute to Carol

Shields", *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, ([Winter 2005](#)), pp.139-142.

Atwood, Margaret. "Margaret Atwood: the Road to Ustopia", *The Guardian*,

14 October 2011. www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/margaret-atwood-road-to-ustopia. Accessed 2 August 2017.

"A Conversation with Carol Shields"

<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/330138/larrys-party-by-carol-shields/9780140266771/readers-guide>. Accessed 28 May 2017.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in

Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (Dec. 1988), pp. 519-531.

Carter, Nancy C., "Demeter and Persephone in Margaret Atwood's Novels: Mother –

Daughter Transformations" *Journal of Analytical Psychology*. Vol. 24, Iss. 4, (Oct. 1979), pp. 326-342.

Defalco, Amelia. "Haunting Physicality: Corpses, Cannibalism, and Carnality in

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*", *University Of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 75, No.2, (Spring 2006), pp. 771-783

Derrida, Jacques, "Differance", <https://web.stanford.edu/class/history34q/>, Accessed

19 October 2018

D'Souza, Irene, "Margaret Atwood – Is this the path we want to be on?" *Horizons*,

(Mar. 2004), pp.16-45.

Ellen, Barbara, "Human Shields", *The Guardian*, 28 April 2002,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/apr/28/fiction.carolshields>.

Accessed 28 May 2017.

Fiamengo, Janice, "Postcolonial Guilt in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*" *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 29, Iss. 1, (Spring 1999), pp. 141-163.

Gordon, Neta, "Charted Territory: Canadian Literature by Women, the Genealogical Plot, and SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*" *Narrative*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May 2006), pp.163- 180.

Grigore, Rodica, "(Re)descoperind trecutul", *Viata Românească*, Vol. 110, No.7, (Jul. 2015), pp. 107-110.

Hanson, Heidi, "Biography Matters: Carol Shields, *Mary Swann*, A. S. Byatt, *Possession*, Deborah Crombie, *Dreaming of the Bones*", *Orbis Literarum*, No. 58, (Sept. 2003), pp. 353–370.

Hole, Jackson, "Interview with Carol Shields", 23 May 1998.

[http://prodloadbalancer-1055872027.us-east-](http://prodloadbalancer-1055872027.us-east-1.elb.amazonaws.com/autodoc/page/shilint-1)

[1.elb.amazonaws.com/autodoc/page/shilint-1](http://prodloadbalancer-1055872027.us-east-1.elb.amazonaws.com/autodoc/page/shilint-1). Accessed 28 May 2017.

Irimia, Florin, "Alias Grace – A Study in Duality" *Analele Științifice ale Universității "Al. I. Cuza" din Iași. Limbi și Literaturi Străine*, Vol. 8-9, No.-, (2005-2006), pp. 109-126.

---. "Cuvinte potrivite" *Observator Cultural*, Vol. 3, No.155, (Feb. 2010), pp. 8-9.

---. "Despre povestirea unei alte povestiri" *Observator Cultural*, Vol. 3, No.119, (Jun. 2002), pp. 26-27.

---."O Pogorâre în Maelstrom – Universul ficțional al lui Margaret Atwood" *Observator Cultural*, Vol. 3, No. 115, (May 2002), pp. 7-8.

---. "Payback Time" *Timpul*, Vol. 11, No.2 (134), (Feb. 2010), pp. 18-19.

---. "Povestea cameristei sau drumul lung al nopții către zi" *Observator Cultural*,

Vol. 8, No.134 (391), (Sept.-Oct 2007), pp. 8-9.

Jeremiah, Emily, “Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond” *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* Vol. 8, No. 1,2 (May 2002), pp. 21-33.

Jones, Bethan, “Traces of Shame: Margaret Atwood's Portrayal of Childhood Bullying and its Consequences in *Cat's Eye*” *Academic Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1, (Jan. 2008), pp. 29-42

Khalis, Abdul Salam, “Quest for Literary Selfhood in Contemporary Canadian Literature” *Dialogue*, Vol. 12 Issue 2, (Apr-Jun 2017), pp. 149-170.

Lăsconi, Elisabeta, “Biografii și psihologii feminine - fluxul unui destin feminin” *România Literară*, Vol. 41, No. 44, (Nov. 2008), pp. 28.

McNamara, Mary, “Interview with Margaret Atwood”, 24 Apr. 2017.

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/hero/complex/la-et-hc-margaret-atwood-feminism-handmaid-tale-20170424-htlstory.html>. Accessed 28 May 2017.

Mead, Rebecca, “Margaret Atwood, the Prophet of Dystopia”, 17 Apr. 2017.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/17/margaret-atwood-the-prophet-of-dystopia>. Accessed 28 May 2017.

Neuman, Shirley, “‘Just a Backlash: Margaret Atwood and feminism’”, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (Summer 2006), pp. 857-868.

O'Reilly, Andrea, “Motherhood Hall of Fame” – keynote speech, 2014.

<https://mommuseum.org/aint-i-a-feminist-matricentric-feminism-feminist-mamas-and-why-mothers-need-a-feminist-movementtheory-of-their-own/>. Accessed 9 February 2019.

Pavey, Ruth, “A Warm Front – *The Republic of Love* by Carol Shields”, *New Statesman and Society*, Vol. 5, Iss. 195, (Mar. 1992), pp.38.

- Rogers, Shelagh. "Interview with Anne and Nicholas Giardini on Startle and Illuminate", 25 Apr. 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/books/2016/04/startle-and-illuminate.html>. Accessed 28 May 2017.
- , "Anne and Nicholas Giardini on Being Part of Carol Shields's Family", 04 Jun. 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/books/2016/04/startle-and-illuminate.html>. Accessed 28 May 2017.
- Segal, Lynne. "After Judith Butler: Identities, Who Needs Them?" *Subjectivity*, Vol. 25, 2008, pp.381–394.
- Spence, D. Jonathan, "Margaret Atwood and the Edges of History", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 103, No. 5 (Dec. 1998), pp. 1522-1525.
- Stovel, Nora Foster, "'American or Canadian': Carol Shields's Geographical and Literary Border-Crossing" *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 40, Iss. 4, (2010), pp. 517-529.
- Tolan, Fiona, "Feminist Utopias and Questions of Liberty: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale as Critique of Second Wave Feminism", *Women: A Cultural Review* Vol. 16. No. 1, (2005), pp. 18-32.
- , "Sucking the Blood Out of Second Wave Feminism: Postfeminist Vampirism in Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride" *Gothic Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, (Nov. 2007), pp. 45-57.
- Wachtel, Eleanor, "Interview with Carol Shields", 8 Jul. 1997. <http://www.cbc.ca/books/2016/04/startle-and-illuminate.html>. Accessed 28 May 2017.
- Wachtel, Eleanor, "Interview with Carol Shields", 2002. <http://www.cbc.ca/books/2016/04/startle-and-illuminate.html>. Accessed 28 May 2017.

Watson, Emma, "Interview with Margaret Atwood" 14 July 2017.

<http://ew.com/books/2017/07/14/emma-watson-interviews-margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale/>. Accessed 2 August 2017.