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“And They Went to Bury Her”

*Margaret Atwood’s The Blind Assassin* 
*and The Robber Bride*

**Debrah Raschke** 
**And** 
**Sarah Appleton**

At the end of *Cat’s Eye*, protagonist Elaine characterizes the old women she admires on the plane “laughing like on gravel” as women who are “amazingly carefree”: “They’re rambunctious, they’re full of beans; they’re tough as thirteen, they’re innocent and dirty, they don’t give a hoot. Responsibilities have fall away from them, obligations, old hates, and grievances; now for a short while they can play again like children, but this time without the pain” (444–45). Yet Atwood’s aging female characters are often those who have not yet learned how to disengage themselves from pain; they undergo late-life quests into the past to encounter the anguish that has inhibited their growth. Atwood’s aging female characters are often engaged in pivotal searches for identity that necessitate a retrospective evaluation, one that invariably proffers an inner adventure. Yet the ultimate “answers” are not always positive or affirming. Iris in *The Blind Assassin* reinterprets and perhaps even reinvents the past. She subverts her pain by denying its source and mitigating her own complicity. In contrast, in *The Robber Bride*, the quest belongs not to the bad girl but to those who confront her, including the reader.

Atwood’s writing has always reflected the allure of the bad girl. This bad girl, as many have noted, cannot be easily exorcized to some no-man’s-land where her influence becomes contained and minimized. She
is a constant presence, inseparable from us, like the dove in Coleridge’s “Christabel” whose breath becomes indistinguishable from the breath of the snake that has coiled around its neck. She cannot, as Charis suggests of Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, “be meditated out of existence” (75). Karen Stein, in her analysis of Zenia, notes: “When she is supposedly dead, she returns to life again. When she is cremated for the (seemingly) second time, the jar containing her ashes cracks as it is being thrown into the water” (99). Extending Zenia’s otherness to a global perspective, Coral Ann Howells sees Zenia as an incarnation of the “diseases, neuroses, and traumas which are buried in the foundations of Western culture.” She is a postwar immigrant, a victim of the Holocaust, sexual abuse, AIDS, sexual violence, and drug addiction. She represents, in other words, “the festering cancers that scar Western society and the suppression of their memory” (149). She is everywhere, and, however she is configured, her boundaries reach far beyond her body and her narrative.

Zenia and Iris as character types are no strangers to Atwood’s fiction. They have numerous predecessors. In concocting fictions of their pasts, Zenia and Iris resemble what Barbara Hill Rigney identifies in her discussion of *Alias Grace* as the “woman as fabricator, seamstress, weaver, spider who becomes one with the image of the tale-teller writer.” The motif is familiar in much of Atwood’s fiction: artist/protagonist/witch who is “capable of casting spells” and who is “on trial for witchcraft if not murder” (158, 163). As tale-teller and shifter of stories, they recall Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, who always insists that her story is a “reconstruction.” Both Zenia and Iris also exemplify the allure of the defiant, who-gives-a-damn bad girl. They are sexually free Katherine-Kath-Kat-K who would not think twice about coating her preserved ovarian cyst in chocolate and sending it to the lover who abandoned her. She does as she pleases, heedless of what others may think of her. They are Moira of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, who, in defiance of the right-wing fundamentalist Republic of Gilead, binds Aunt Elizabeth to the toilet seat, steals her clothes, and swaggers out of the fundamentalist compound.2 Zenia extends the character composite even further. In her not-quite death, she bears kin to Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, who “[plans] her death carefully,” giving up her traditional life—“years of murdered breakfasts”—to escape into multiple lives, multiple identities, and reckless pleasure (*Lady Oracle* 3–7). Zenia, too, bears resemblance to Lucy in “Death by Landscape,” who, as the more dazzling of the Lucy-Lois pair, breaks the rules, spurns the
other’s opinions, and, in an act of rebellion, burns her sanitary napkin. And like Lucy, her presence, even in her absence, is pervasive.  

Iris, The Blind Assassin’s narrator, is rather like a blend of Elaine Risley and Cordelia from Cat’s Eye. That is, instead of projecting her anger and insecurity onto another character, an evil twin, Iris is allowed the complexity of being both the insecure victim and the insecure victimizer. She is, after all, compared to a blind assassin, not just to a cunning, malevolent assassin. Or she is like Tony from The Robber Bride, who is able to act out some of her fantasies as Tnomerf Ynot, rather than just projecting them onto Zenia. Although she remains willfully blind to the extent of her complicity in her sister Laura’s death, clues in the text suggest her ambiguous nature.

Iris bears a marked resemblance to some of the more unflattering depictions of Guinevere from the Arthurian legends. As Atwood makes reference to Tennyson’s Idylls of the King, Iris is associated with the deceitful and adulterous queen in some portrayals, as well as the innocent victim in others. And as in William Morris’s “Defence of Guenevere,” she, too, insists that her accusers are erroneous in their pronouncements against her: “Nevertheless you lie” is her persistent response when confronted with the evidence of her betrayal of Arthur. Similar to the poem’s queen, who flirts with surreptitiously admitting the truth while denying the interpretation, Iris acknowledges the actual events from her past but argues against the interpretations of her intent. Yes, Iris/Guinevere does have an adulterous affair with Alex/Lancelot betraying Richard/Arthur and destroying any possible romance of Laura/Elaine with Alex. And yes, Iris/Guinevere can be held partially accountable for the death of Laura/Elaine; however, Iris affirms that her affair is justified and that Laura has maintained unrealistic illusions, or as it may be according to Iris, delusions. Yet Iris would also have her readers—and perhaps herself—believe that it was she who was the Elaine, not her sister. She would like us to see her as Elaine (or Tennyson’s “Lady of Shallot”) who spent her lonely days weaving a vision of the world she is forbidden to enjoy while being barred from her rightful lover.

Iris bears kinship with Elaine in Cat’s Eye, who embarks upon a memoir of her past. Yet Elaine, while also depicting herself as victimized, ultimately acknowledges her own retaliatory torment that she inflicts on Cordelia. After the trials of her childhood, Elaine reveals her subsequent treatment of the now-weakened girl. As Cordelia’s power has been eradicated, Elaine gloats over her own “mean mouth” and
her cavalier behavior with the troubled Cordelia. In the end, Elaine laments the loss of her “twin,” regretting the lack of reconciliation. Iris, however, overtly refuses to bear adequate responsibility for her actions. While she must admit having a part in the tragedy of Laura’s death, Iris attempts to maintain the posture of innocence.

Iris is also kin to Serena Joy in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a woman resentful of her aging, a woman whose potential freedom to enjoy her age and acquired wisdom has been thwarted by the very community she strove to create. By watching the videotapes of her earlier evangelical self, Serena Joy validates that she was, in fact, a vital part of the social change in which she is now trapped—in other words, she has made her own bed. However, the narration of Iris in *The Blind Assassin* seems less of a spiritual retrospection to articulate the truth—even if it is painful—than a clever and maybe desperate fabrication in an attempt to perpetuate the myth she has created. Rather than reminiscing with angry resignation like Serena Joy, Iris is determined to present her version, her history.

In the present time of her narration, Iris is an elderly woman, antagonistic and alienated. Her days are marked by a daily proprietary trek to the button factory—once possessed by her father—and an internal diatribe directed toward those individuals, both alive and dead, who may have cared for her. Iris measures her life by how much pain she is still capable of inflicting, from her incomprehensible sneering at Walter and Myra, who seem to be under no obligation to Iris, to her passionate self-defense in regard to her treatment of her adoring sister Laura. For example, in an acerbic yet funny admission, Iris recounts with relish her rudeness to the disciples of Laura. One of her responses to inquiries about obtaining Laura’s letters reads as follows: “Dear Miss W., In my view your plan for a ‘Commemoration Ceremony’ at the bridge which was the scene of Laura Chase’s tragic death is both tasteless and morbid. You must be out of your mind. I believe you are suffering from auto-intoxication. You should try an enema” (286). Iris recounts, “For years I took grim satisfaction in this venomous doo-dling” (287). Iris spares no one, not her lawyer, not her family, and not the people she sees on the street. Her narration, then, is more than suspect. As James Held asserts, Iris’s tale “brims with suspense and pathos, horrendous betrayals and monstrous lies” (“Sisters”).

Certainly, definitions of the postmodern literary tend to include recognition of the aspects of any narrator’s inherent unreliability. Brian McHale, among others, posits that postmodern-era authors capitalize
on readers’ acceptance of blatant misdirection in narrative and their unwillingness to discredit the authority of the narrator. Atwood, however, inverts this phenomenon, forcing readers, in fact, to question Iris’s authority. That is, although Iris attempts to manipulate her text to elicit sympathy from the readers, the readers find they must resist the perhaps natural tendency to identify with the narrator. Iris’s bid for absolution falters as the readers cannot suspend skepticism.

That Iris is an unreliable narrator is more than obvious. However, unlike a traditional unreliable narrator, such as Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, who appears to be convinced of the validity of his rendition of Jay Gatsby’s romantic nobility, Iris’s legitimate conviction of the veracity of her version of the events—as well as her motive for the narration itself—is highly questionable. Just as Laura argues that her “enhancements” of the photographs’ faces demonstrate the “colours” of the subjects’ “souls” (“It’s the colours they *ought* to have been in” [194]), *The Blind Assassin*’s readers become aware that Iris is narrating the story in the colors in which she would like it to be presented. She writes, “Most people prefer a past in which nothing smells” (52). But, as Roberta Rubenstein recognizes, Iris can be “duplicitous,” “self-serving and untrustworthy” (236).

Contrary to attempting an honestly objective viewpoint, Iris presents her version to depict herself in a more flattering tone; she exhibits little of Zenia’s devil-may-care-if-I-am-a-bad-girl demeanor, although often her bad-girl persona is irrepressible. Iris’s goal involves ignoring the exterior appearance of her behavior while, paradoxically, presenting an exterior narrative that is “colored” with her contradictory assessments. Molly Hite recognizes that the plot is propelled by “the need to understand Laura, or to understand how Iris understands Laura” (1). And while Iris’s memoir is, in part, her ostensible attempt to explain Laura’s mysterious death, there are other strategies informing the narrative. Iris may also be seen as surreptitiously bragging about her unnoticed victories, while maintaining the appearance of victimization. The very last portion of the first chapter contains Iris’s justification: “But some people can’t tell where it hurts. They can’t calm down. They can’t ever stop howling” (2). Questioning the prospect that her memory is tainted by rhetorically asking, “is what I remember the same thing as what actually happened?” Iris tellingly responds by stating, “It is now: I am the only survivor” (217–18). Iris initially maintains that the only way she can write the truth is to assume that what she writes will never be read, yet she admits, “At the very least we
want a witness. We can’t stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down” (95), tacitly acknowledging that she does in fact anticipate an audience.7 Thus, early in the novel, the unnamed woman in one of The Blind Assassin’s three intertwined narratives complains to her storytelling lover who has reacted to her objections by promising to “rewrite history”; she states: “You can’t, […] . . . The word has gone forth. You can’t cancel half a line of it” (30). However, Iris, in writing/revising the prevailing version of history—for example, subverting in her memoir the public’s assumption that Laura Chase has written the novel—clearly indicates that history can indeed be rewritten, undermined, reconceptualized.

Many reviewers of the novel, while acknowledging certain narrative sleight of hand, have tended to absolve Iris of purely malicious intent. For example, Ann Janine Morey sees Iris as a “typical” Atwood narrator: “a bewildered cynical female narrator [who] senses the horror of her own spiritual emptiness” (28). Likewise, Brenda Wineapple describes Iris as a woman who was “taught self-effacement, obedience, modesty and quiescence” (58). Yet she also asserts that Iris is a “woman without affect who nightly accedes to her husband’s savagery, insulates herself from her sister’s suffering and refuses to see the incest and adultery and suicide committed before her eyes. Yes, yes, she is a kind of blind assassin, cutthroat and complex, herself a wounded child impassively doing what she has to do” (59). As the blind assassin of the novel, Iris and her killing story are imported with both invention and destruction. Furthermore, Iris’s tale contains certain clues that she has positioned herself in the middle of some romantic fairy tale. Most tellingly, her recitation of her married life is remarkably similar to her childhood fantasies about Adelia, her long-dead grandmother. Iris writes that Adelia was “married off” to “money—crude money, button money. She was expected to refine this money, like oil” (59). Iris further remembers, “I used to romanticize Adelia. I would gaze out of my window at night, over the lawns and the moon-silvered bed of ornamentals, and see her trailing through the grounds in a white lace tea gown. I gave her a languorous, world-weary, faintly mocking smile. Soon I added a lover” (60). When recounting how the house—Avilion—was named, Iris believes that Adelia’s choice of King Arthur’s death place signified “how hopelessly in exile she considered herself to be” (61). Finally, Iris admits that she and Laura were “brought up” by Adelia: “inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be” (62). As Iris’s own marriage was a marriage of
commerce, she claimed to have had a lover, and she, too, portrays a life of “exile,” the similarities of both suggest her indoctrination by Adelia. However, Iris’s feelings of entrapment also suggest how disillusioned she has become with her earlier fantasies.

Iris’s tinting of herself as the victim is prevalent throughout the novel. She describes herself as one of the sheep who are “so dumb they jeopardize themselves, and get stuck on cliffs or cornered by wolves” (243). Yet this depiction hardly rings completely true when compared with other descriptions of herself as conniving and rebellious. In particular, her description of herself in the novel-within-the-novel “The Blind Assassin” as a young woman who lies and steals contrasts markedly with the naïve and silent new wife who endures her husband’s brutality and suffers through her sister-in-law Winifred’s manipulations. And although Iris presents herself as a victim, enduring a virtually loveless existence, her frequent protestations of caring for her sister are often undercut by her depictions of events.

This is not to say, however, that Iris’s intentions are without some mitigating factors; she often acknowledges her ambivalence and her ambiguous purposes. While Zenia in The Robber Bride is clearly weaving webs of lies to ensnare her victims and provoke confrontation, Iris often reflects upon her confusion. In describing the photograph of herself as a child and Laura as an infant that resided on her mother’s night table, Iris sees her own “accusing” and angry expression and wonders, “Was I angry because I’d been told to hold the baby, or was I in fact defending it? Shielding it—reluctant to let it go?” (85). Yet she also concedes that she and Laura were engaged in battle. With distinct irritation, after her mother has voiced her dying wish that Iris be a “good sister,” she asks, “I felt I was a victim of injustice: why was it me who was supposed to be a good sister to Laura, instead of the other way around?” She reflects that her mother’s love for both sisters “was a given—solid and tangible, like a cake. The only question was which one of us was going to get the bigger slice” (93).

Iris complains, “I didn’t know that I was about to be left with [my mother’s] idea of me; with her idea of my goodness pinned onto me like a badge, and no chance to throw it back at her” (94). Feeling bound by her mother’s request, Iris maintains the front of dutiful sister. However, Iris trains herself to exploit the art of miscommunication and misdirection, and the narrative often reveals Iris’s desire to hide or distort the truth. Iris learns early the power of such “tinting.” She notes that when she and Laura were little, they would shift their “dull grey oatmeal”
into the pools of colored light made as the sun came through a stained-glass window, making it “magic food, either charmed or poisoned depending on my whim or Laura’s mood” (99). Likewise, when writing of her supposedly sadistic and pedophilic tutor, Mr. Erskine, she allows, “in addition to lying and cheating, I’d learned half-concealed insolence and silent resistance. I’d learned that revenge is a dish best eaten cold. I’d learned not to get caught” (167).

It becomes increasingly obvious that Iris maintains a certain amount of animosity toward her sister. When Laura was a child, Iris remembers following Laura and pushing her to the ground on the day of their mother’s funeral, and how she enjoyed Laura’s crying: “I wanted her to suffer too—as much as me. I was tired of her getting away with being so young” (97). Her resentment toward Laura—whom she even subtly accuses of being responsible for their mother’s death—continues throughout the novel, culminating, of course, with her brutal revelation that she and Alex were lovers, a revelation and sisterly betrayal that may have caused Laura to commit suicide.¹⁰

Just as Zenia is both other and doubled self to Tony, Charis, and Roz, so, too, are Iris and Laura both opposite and alike. Michiko Kakutani writes, “it soon becomes clear that [Iris and Laura] are alter egos of sorts—doppelgangers and soul mates” (“Three Stories”). Alex’s treatment of the sisters exemplifies their otherness: whereas he calls the fourteen-year-old Laura “a saint in training” (212)¹¹ while he is hiding at Avilion, he is sexually provocative toward Iris, kissing her and unbuttoning her blouse. In Iris’s accounts, the sisters could not be more different. Laura is ethereal; Iris is solid flesh (which bruises). Laura is socially conscious; Iris is materially conscious. Laura is a dreamer; Iris is “practical” (212). Laura yearns for Alex’s soul; Iris wants his body. Laura is Mary, and Iris is Martha (216).

Yet Alex, too, apparently recognizes their likeness to each other. In telling Iris the story of the Peach Women of Planet Aa’A, Alex recounts a tale of men’s idea of perfect women: “One was a sexpot; the other was more serious-minded and could discuss art, literature, and philosophy, not to mention theology.” Clearly, Alex is describing first Iris, then Laura. Yet he also claims, “The girls seemed to know which was required of them at any given moment, and would switch around according to the moods and inclinations” of the men (353–54). Alex, in his own tinted storytelling, seems to be warning Iris that perfectly accommodating women can be “tedious” and irritating; ultimately the male protagonists of the story wish to escape, even though their
apparent paradise offers them the granting of every desire. Alex hints that Iris and Laura are too much alike in their need and care for him, a need, perhaps, born out of competition.

As Iris and Laura are doubles or mirrored images of each other, Iris measures who she is by what is lacking in Laura. If Laura is “good,” then she is evil. But Iris has a way of making “goodness” seem eccentric or false: “Don’t misunderstand me,” she states, “I am not scoffing at goodness, which is far more difficult to explain than evil, and just as complicated. But sometimes it’s hard to put up with” (366). If Laura is altruistic in gritty and needy situations, Iris participates in charity work at superficial costume balls. If Laura is challenged by the meaning of language, Iris claims to be accepting of what is said to her and only questions the validity of language after it has been proven false. Iris’s antithetical behavior, then, reflects her ambivalence and resentment toward Laura.

But Iris, taught “concealment,” cannot provoke confrontation. Instead, she enacts revenge under cover, much as she writes The Blind Assassin under Laura’s name. Iris is well aware of Laura’s feelings for Alex, and she blatantly ignores the strength of Laura’s devotion—not only to Alex but also to herself in her quest to renounce Laura. Iris tints the reader’s perceptions of Laura, making her appear vague and eccentric at best, insane at worst. Yet, at many times during the novel, Laura appears to be quite astute—even worldlier than Iris, such as when she instructs Iris on what to expect on her wedding night. Tragically, Iris is never able to totally recognize herself in Laura and vice versa. Although she comments on their similarities—acknowledging, for example, that both are “too secretive for charm, or else too blunt” (233), she continues to insist upon their irreconcilable differences. Both have, of course, been orphaned and need to rely upon each other. Yet, more than the lack of parents, both share the need for connection, acceptance, and growth beyond their present states. Iris gives us a fleeting vision of their unity when they share a moment after their father’s death: “We went straight up to Laura’s room and sat down on her bed. We held on tightly to each other’s hands—left in right, right in left” (313). This union is particularly poignant given that the photographs they have of themselves with Alex contain the severed hand of the other sister.

Clues to the “true” events are most liberal in the narrative within a narrative, “The Blind Assassin,” published with Laura named as author. Readers may speculate that Iris, armed with the power of ano-
nymity, feels comfortable enough not to overly protest her innocence. During one of the lovers’ trysts, Iris, as the unnamed woman, boasts, “It’s not my heart that’s bloody, it’s my mind. I’m bloody-minded. Or so I’ve been told” (131). And thus, Laura, not Iris, is the “victim” of the novel, and unlike Tony, Charis, and Roz, she dies instead of transcending the betrayal to which she is subjected. One could say that the novel has two victims, the blind assassin and the one she kills. In this way it is a more complex rendering of the ability to hurt than the earlier novel, as we come to understand and eventually empathize with both the victim and the perpetrator.

Iris’s failure to resolve her ambivalence or to truthfully and completely admit to her behaviors in the past may then be due to her polarized ways of thinking. If, like her father’s legs—one of which is “good” and one injured and therefore “bad”—Iris has been viewing herself and Laura as mirrored images of each other, then Iris has become trapped in a detrimental mode of assessing the past. In Laura’s Latin notebook, Iris finds a translation of the goddess Iris freeing grief-stricken Dido’s soul from her body with death. Laura is clearly absolving Iris from her betrayal. But, unlike Tony, Charis, and Roz, who actively work to reconnect their severed selves and accept both the positive and negative aspects of those selves, Iris often rejects the possibility of spiritual becoming. She admits as much in the final passages: “But what is a memorial, when you come right down to it, but a commemoration of wounds endured. Endured and resented. Without memory, there can be no revenge” (508).

Atwood suggests that age does not necessarily endow one with wisdom, character, or spirituality. The specter of impending death does not automatically release the urge to confess, atone, and cleanse. Iris manifests only few and late signs of resigned regret, acceptance, or regenerated wisdom. And unlike Tony, Charis, and Roz, who deny complicity with Zenia and refuse to allow pain and anger to dominate their remaining lives, Iris can only wonder, “How lost to myself I have become” (298).

It is only in the few remaining pages that Iris suggests her own part in Laura’s tragedy, and she does so only after deciding to leave the manuscript to Sabrina. Iris’s own admission is belated. She relates: “I did believe, at first, that I only wanted justice. I thought my heart was pure. We do like to have such good opinions of our own motives when we’re about to do something harmful, to someone else” (497). In a sense, although Iris is unable to embrace the truth completely,
she offers Sabrina the “chance to reinvent” herself at will by proposing multiple versions of Sabrina’s parentage to choose from (513). Given the possible interpretations of the narrative, Sabrina may choose her grandmother—Iris or Laura, as Laura has claimed to be Aimee’s mother, her baby switched at birth to replace Iris’s possibly dead baby. She might also choose her grandfather—Alex or Richard, as both may have had sexual relations with each of the sisters. In other words, she attempts to free Sabrina from the kind of fixed role Iris has felt to be imposed upon herself. In this way, although she has rejected a spiritual journey of her own, she acts as spiritual guide to Sabrina by giving her the power of choice, a choice she felt was denied to her.

In *The Robber Bride*, one aspect of the spiritual journey—the confrontation, acceptance, and, most importantly, self-recognition of otherness—is readily apparent. This encounter with the other is how most critics read the *tour de force* that ensues when Zenia’s life collides with those of Tony, Charis, and Roz. Jennifer Enos notes that Zenia is the composite of each of their names (14). Karen Stein sees her as a “shadow self, a mirror of the darker side, the hidden anxieties of each character” (99). Indeed, Zenia does mirror the three women she betrays. The question then becomes, what do Tony, Roz, and Charis learn from this confrontation with otherness? What knowledge do they gain from this lethal quest in which the café that sets the novel in motion is an anagram for Quixote (ibid. 98)? Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis sees Zenia as providing an “intersubjective space” in which each of the characters learns to heal: Tony, in her exchanges with Zenia, discovers the pleasures of sharing her “inner world” with others; Charis, in providing physical nurture to Zenia, learns the importance of her own bodily needs; and Roz, in finding a deeper acceptance of her parents, learns to accept herself more fully. All three learn “some new ways to navigate the in-between space that separates and joins us to the other” (167). For Lynn Bloom and Veronica Makowsky, Zenia is a “feminist avenger” who teaches the trio “to take charge of their lives” (170). Donna Potts sees the three women gaining independence from a colonized and patriarchal identity and, in the process, refusing the phallocentric “impulse to dichotomize” (297), while Shannon Hengen interprets Zenia as a means of escaping imprisoning relationships. Sonia Mycak sees Zenia, in spite of her nastiness, as an avenue toward a more liberated consciousness. For J. Brooks Bouson, Zenia is a mirror to “repressed” and “outlawed emotions” that enable a metamorphosis from victim to survivor (150), and for Sarah Appleton
Aguiar, Zenia is a conduit for rediscovering the repressed “bitch,” for integrating “rejected qualities” into a previously split and attenuated self (132). As Sharon Wilson notes in Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics, Atwood has repeatedly resisted making the Good Woman tantamount to passivity, refusing to split images of the Great Mother into the “positive mother and the destructive witch” (17). This is especially true in her treatment of Zenia. Associated with the moon in a tarot reading for Charis, seen by Tony as “glowing” like the moon, and associated with destructive blood from the slaughter of Charis’s chickens, Zenia embodies the Destroyer aspect of the Triple Goddess. Her rage stems from her amputation—patriarchal society’s refusal to acknowledge the creative and the destructive as existing simultaneously in the mother figure (see Wilson, Sexual Politics). Or, one might add, her rage is the result of her suppression and control by patriarchal hermeneutics. She becomes that which has produced her: sheer power.

Zenia, not unsurprisingly, inspires envy: she is reckless, excessively beautiful, and free from the tyranny of others’ perceptions. As Jean Wyatt notes, Zenia is the Lacanian real, “that which exceeds the symbolic order, that which no signifier can represent, that which those inside the symbolic order are at a loss to account for.” She is the “image of the uncastrated self capable of unfettered and unlimited self-expression” (42). And, in that freedom, she wields power. She expresses the rebellion that the young, demure Tony cannot—something Tony consciously acknowledges when she agrees to write Zenia’s term paper for her. She resembles Tony’s “invisible twin,” the Russian or Martian sounding Tnomerf Ynot: “Taller, stronger, and more daring” than Tony (153). After the uncomfortable dinner where Tony’s father grills her mother on the bridge club meeting she did not attend, Tony goes up to her room and “murmurs to herself in the darkness” the words “bulc egdirb,” and immediately a full-fledged scene emerges: “The barbarians gallop across the plains. At their head rides Tnomerf Ynot, her long ragged hair flying in the wind, a sword in each of her hands. Bulc egdirb! she calls, urging them forward. It’s a battle cry and they are on the rampage” (163). It is the language Tony uses to camouflage her increasing distance from her mother and to empower herself. It is nearly the same image that Tony has of Zenia after Zenia relays the story of her sex-commodifying White Russian mother: Zenia has been through horrors and has emerged victorious. “Tony pictures her on a horse, cloak flying, sword arm raised” (184). For Tony, Zenia,
initially, is a means to fighting back her feelings of abandonment and powerlessness.

When the three encounter the resurrected Zenia at the Toxique, Tony reports, “Zenia is as beautiful as ever.” Her hair is “blown around her head by the imperceptible wind that accompanies her everywhere, moulding her clothes against her body, fitfully moving the dark tendrils around her forehead, filling the air with a sound of rustling” (36). For Charis, she “strides right past them in her richly textured dress, with her long legs, her startling new breasts, her glossy hair nebulous around her shoulders” (73). Associated with the “imagery of the moon, of light and dark,” she is, as Stein notes, “like a goddess”: her hair is “black and alive like Medusa’s” (99). She enthralls and casts spells. And usually she is quite good at winning whatever she desires. She is raw power, what Cynthia Kuhn identifies as a “Toxic Chic” (49). When Tony, Charis, and Roz first meet her as younger women, Zenia is a seeming conduit who can heal the wounds of abandonment, abuse, and infidelity.

For all three women, Zenia also represents a freedom to break the rules, a freedom from the injunction to forever please. Impassive to the judgments of others, weaver of enthrallments, she is Cixous’s “Laugh of Medusa,” who offers an alternative to a confining, goody-two-shoes conventionality. Who hasn’t at least once had a flickering desire to throw a “revenge party” (141)? Who hasn’t had the desire to scrap the law of the Father, particularly since to live under its reign is to acquiesce to its containing labels of femininity: as lack, as nothingness, as mirror to masculinity? Who hasn’t had a fleeting impulse to throw guilt overboard—to say to hell with all those save-the-whales, save-the-feminine-victims, save-the-raped-moms, save-the-battered-grannies, save-everybody campaigns. “Poky, boring charities,” Roz notes. How “daring” and “liberating” to say “to hell with guilt!” (107). “It was like speeding in a convertible, tailgating, weaving in and out without signaling, stereo on full blast and screw the neighbors, throwing your leftovers out the window, the ribbons, the wrapping paper, the half-eaten filo pastries and the champagne truffles” (107). As Jean Wyatt notes, “Good girls all, the protagonists envy Zenia’s untrammeled inhibition, her ineffable evasion of the ‘ineluctable law’ of the father, and her heedless jouissance” (52). Zenia plays unbridled double to Tony, Charis, and Roz. And she is us. Well, maybe not exactly us—us minus the excessive beauty, the exotic tour de force, the seemingly unassailable power. Tony, Charis, and Roz do learn from Zenia, and they do
envy her. However, the doubleness Zenia proffers and the insights the protagonists gain are more complicated than simply a recognition and acknowledgment of the Other.\footnote{In spite of surface similarities, something sets Zenia apart from her fictional predecessors whose rebellion against conventionality, social repression, and theocratic tyranny yields an appeal, even if that appeal comes with a price. It is that difference that articulates the spiritual crisis that confronts Tony, Charis, Roz, and ultimately the reader.}

Granted, what we see of Zenia is filtered through Tony, Roz, and Charis,\footnote{But with that caveat aside, what we see once we get beyond the razzle-dazzle is, in Tony’s words, “pure freewheeling malevolence” (458). As Roz suggests, she “kicks low and dirty,” figures out “where the jugular is,” and then goes for it (113–14). In the abandoned Tony, Zenia discerns the need for a never-experienced human connection, and thus she emerges “like a long-lost friend, like a sister, like a wind,” whom Tony welcomes (127). Thus, for Tony, she is an orphan whose White Russian mother rented her out for sex when she was just five or six. In Charis, Zenia discerns a battered psyche that needs to reunite body and spirit, one who, subjected to physical abuse as a child, cannot bear to picture another’s pain. She thus appears in Charis’s yoga class, bruised and helpless, seeking alternative strategies for healing. In her life story designed for Charis, she is the daughter of a clairvoyant, Romanian gypsy who was murdered by the Germans and left to die in the snow. In successful magazine editor Roz, plagued by her Catholic-Jewish background, Zenia senses Roz’s insecurities surrounding her father and her husband. Thus, for Roz, Zenia surfaces as a journalist/consummate storyteller who offers Roz a story she cannot refuse. She is, for Roz, the displaced child whose partial Jewish heritage forces her parents to spirit her out of Nazi Germany, a feat made possible by Roz’s father as heroic liaison. When the trio, as young women, first meets Zenia, the lure she exudes initially seems to answer the lack in each of their lives. For each of them, Zenia finds a tale that provides an empathetic link, one that says, “I, the Other, am like you.”\footnote{The trio’s later confrontation with Zenia, however, yields something different. Although each of the three women is drawn to Zenia’s magnetism and would like to become her at some point, ultimately they recognize that she is not someone they wish to become; all three, in the end, refuse to kill her and, in doing so, reject becoming her. Thus, although Zenia is the catalyst for envy in the young women’s lives, it is Zenia herself as a force of envy and pure lust for power that each of the}}
three women characters must recognize and ultimately refuse. In her “staking out territory” (111), Zenia displaces one by one Tony, Charis, and Roz when she steals their men. She occupies their space and substitutes her own presence for their own. In this it is Zenia who dramatizes envy. Zenia gains little from her exploits. Aside from the money, she does not really want the booty she acquires: West, Mitch, and Billy are merely trifles to be tossed away. Like the weasel of “Weasel Nights,” Zenia’s pleasure is in the taking, in the depletion of others. Commenting on the “primitive origins of envy,” Jean Wyatt notes that envy often attributes a kind of omnipotence to the other: “in the moment of envy one perceives only the other’s power, only the subject mastery of a particular field, only the state of being one desires to possess. The facet of the other’s life that one envies fills out the other’s whole figure, eclipsing the parts of his or her existence that might be unsatisfactory. (Indeed, even if one knows that the other is unhappy in some aspect of her life, that knowledge is blocked by envy.) Envy is in the first instance a desire to be the other, to possess his or her power” (54–55). As Wyatt further notes, “the sentiment, ‘I want to be you,’” nevertheless, “does not fully account for the malevolence, the nastiness” frequently attributed to envy: the “desire to enjoy the other woman’s success includes a desire to replace her.” The “underlying calculus works like this: ‘there is only one position, and there are two of us; therefore you must go so I can be in your place and be filled with all that you now possess,’ or, phrased more directly, ‘Get out of my way, I want to be you’” (Wyatt 55, 59).

Such a supplanting is, however, an impossible fantasy. The “venom of envy” emerges in the thwarted drive: “the bitter desire to denigrate the other is the secondary effect of the subject’s frustration that s/he cannot be the other” (ibid. 55). Driven not by a longing for a desired object but by an inner vacuum or an absence of subjectivity, Tony, Charis, and Roz do not really embody envy; envy does not fully reflect Tony’s, Charis’s, and Roz’s response to Zenia; it does, however, reflect Zenia’s response to them. And there is no question that the three at some point want to become Zenia. In this they do envy her. However, it is Zenia, in usurping others’ space, who dramatizes it. Although Wyatt’s analysis focuses on the envy generated in Tony, Charis, and Roz, she does acknowledge that Zenia herself enacts envy (58).

What Tony and the others eventually learn in their confrontations with Zenia is the ability to set boundaries. As Tony intuits early in the novel, “People like Zenia can never entangle themselves in your lives unless you invite them” (127). It is not until the end, however, that
Tony and the others are finally able to set those boundaries, each of them recognizing the ploys in Zenia’s final tales and then refusing to succumb to their enticements or to Zenia’s machinations.

This recognition for Tony, Charis, and Roz emerges late in the diegetic narrative. The tactics of power and victimization that Zenia wields, however, confront the reader throughout the text. In this Zenia functions as a warning to the reader, a means for identifying power tactics and avoiding their implicit victimization. Zenia is a superb strategist who incisively schemes her way into Tony’s, Charis’s, and Roz’s lives. As a military historian, Tony plots intricate military maneuvers, replaying “decisive battles” in order to see whether “they could conceivably have been won by the losing side.” She “studied the maps, the accounts, the disposition of the troops, the technologies.” The battles were not personal; they were simply “problems that might have been solved in another way” (130). Likewise, Tony, Charis, and Roz were nothing personal for Zenia; they were challenges, battles strategically planned. The only emotion was the thrill of winning: Zenia, in effect, uses Tony’s own strengths against her. In appealing to what Tony initially sees as a mutually shared intellect, Zenia befriends her and strikes up an intellectual connection embellished with an isolated, haughty air: the mind and towers—elements with which Tony is very much at home.

Gradually, she uses these comfort zones to detect cracks in Tony’s armor. She interrogates in an inquisition-like fashion with questions that catch Tony off guard: “What would cause you to kill yourself?”; “What if you had cancer?”; “Well, then what would cause you to kill someone else?” (145). She draws her out, gets her to talk about what she never talks about—her mother, the most vulnerable part of her life—and then she uses that exposed vulnerability to belittle Tony and steal her strength. Of Tony’s mother, Zenia remarks, “She sounds fun-loving” and “full of life.” Then she goes on “cheerfully” to say, “I bet she tried to have an abortion, and it didn’t work out” (180). This strategy wields a quadruple blow. In valorizing Tony’s mother as “fun-loving” and “full of life,” it dismisses Tony’s most vulnerable feelings, trusted to this point to no one, as frivolous. In suggesting a possible abortion, it causes her to have an even darker view of her mother than before. Finally, it erases the insidious cruelty through a cavalier cheerfulness that pretends nothing has happened. What Zenia employs are well-known strategies of power:
catch your enemies off guard; use their vulnerability; create distraction through doubt and paranoia; perform outrageous acts and then act as if the damage is nothing, rendering any protest as the fault of the victim.

Zenia also manipulates Tony into feeling guilty for things for which she should feel no guilt, such as making West a cup of tea or admiring Zenia’s rebelliousness, an admiration Zenia herself cultivates and then uses to maneuver Tony to write her term paper for her. What Zenia has plotted, however, is more than a free term paper. Attempting to paralyze Tony’s actions, she plots Tony’s destruction. Claiming a bout of conscience, Zenia tells Tony she thinks that they should confess, which would have ruined Tony’s *raison d’être*: “Now Zenia wants to tell, and there goes Tony’s life. Many large though shadowy possibilities loom ahead for Zenia—journalism, high finance, even politics have all been mentioned—but university professor has never been among them; whereas for Tony it’s the only thing. It’s her vocation; without it she’ll be useless as an amputated hand” (191). Zenia does extort money from Tony, but again it is more than money that Zenia wants. Zenia wants to usurp that part of Tony that Zenia herself lacks—Tony’s intellectual focus. Reflecting on her quandary, Tony muses: “Stripped of her intellectual honesty, her reputation, her integrity, she’ll be exiled. And Zenia is in a position to strip her” (191). For Zenia, it is the pure power of winning, of throwing Tony off balance, of extracting from Tony what she can never possess. “If I can’t be you, I will destroy you.” It is no coincidence that Tony and West watch vampire movies. Vampirelike, Zenia wants to suck the marrow out of Tony’s life. What Zenia wants is Tony in ruins.

With Charis, Zenia likewise plays the twin soul. Feigning a shared interest in alternative spiritualities, Zenia manipulates her way into Charis’s life. Utilizing Charis’s interest in the occult, Zenia claims that her Romanian, gypsy mother was stoned and clubbed by local villagers because they thought she possessed “the evil eye” (301). As she did with Tony, she creates an empathetic link and then exploits a sense of guilt when Charis does not do as she pleases.

Zenia is the weasel of “Weasel Nights” and the weasel who lurks about the farm. “They come at night,” Karen’s powerful grandmother warms. “They bite the chickens in the neck and suck out their blood.” It only takes one weasel in a henhouse, she continues: “They don’t kill to eat. . . . They kill for the pleasure of it” (271). When Charis finds Billy and Zenia have gone, she also finds her chickens dead,
their throats slit, and their blood everywhere. She initially concludes: “It must have been a weasel.” And Charis is right: it was a weasel of sorts—one with a knife, for it is the “bread knife, with blood on the blade” left in the sink that tells the whole story (309). As dippy as it may be, Charis’s chickens “fill her with joy” (227), and it is that joy, which Zenia lacks, that she attempts to kill—not because she can attain it, but because the pleasure for Zenia is in the killing. As she did with Tony, she discerns the weakness and goes for the jugular. Playing on Charis’s need to nurture and heal others (a vestige of Charis’s own need for healing), Zenia claims she has cancer, and using Charis’s sexual insecurities against her, she drives a wedge between Charis and Billy. By “speaking of him in third person even when he’s standing right there,” Zenia erases his presence: “It creates a circle, a circle of language, with Zenia and Charis on the inside and Billy on the outside” (253). And as she did with Tony, Zenia promotes doubt. “He goes to a lot of meetings,” she tells Charis. She uses Charis’s intuitive knowledge systems against her, and she insists on calling Charis “Karen,” the victim of sexual abuse rendered powerless during her uncle’s assaults. By insisting on the victimized Karen, Zenia attempts not only to imprison Charis in her previous powerless incarnation but also to alienate her from herself, from the partial transformation that she has acquired through a different name.

Roz experiences a similar seduction. When Roz encounters Zenia as a journalist posing as a waitress at Nereids, Zenia presents herself as the successful woman with whom Roz identifies, and she offers the story that Roz needs—a tale of her father’s heroism. When she maneuvers her way onto the editorial board of Roz’s magazine, she convinces Roz to drop the word Wisdom from the magazine title and thus changes its fundamental identity. Zenia thus seduces Roz into transforming the magazine into a statement that drains Roz of her identity: the magazine’s essence shifts from a feminist statement to one that privileges the glitzy body, an imprisoning image that has plagued Roz all her life.23 Hinting at the palimpsest that she bears, Zenia comments: “Most women don’t want to read about other women who achieve. . . . It makes them feel unsuccessful” (409). After discovering that Zenia has run off with Mitch, Roz sees that she has been “stale-mated.” Zenia is a beautiful strategist. Any countermove would be her fault (the fault of the victimized): Her going to Mitch would “come across as jealousy” (413).

Zenia, like the weasel in “Weasel Nights,” gets pleasure in the tak-
ing, in the depletion of others. Since such supplanting is an impossible fantasy, the “venom of envy” emerges in the thwarted drive: “The bitter desire to denigrate the other, is the secondary effect of the subject’s frustration that she cannot be the other” (Wyatt 55). Lacking Tony’s integrity, Charis’s joy in simple things, and Roz’s compassion, Zenia denigrates each of these three women in turn. And then she disguises the damage she wreaks. Like Charis’s mother, who uses her sweet voice, “the too-sweet voice she used on the Grade Twos” (280), to mask the abuse she wields (both of Charis and of one of the second-grade pupils she teaches), Zenia works by camouflage. She is indeed a beautiful strategist.

The ultimate task is to recognize Zenia’s power, to discern how she wields it, and then to expose and refuse it. In the end, when Zenia lands in the hotel room that she arranges to appeal to each visitor, all three, after nearly being taken in by her latest story, refuse her requests. None of them succumbed, and none of them believed her, which would have been “another way of succumbing” (489). What they recognize in the present moment is the entrapping scenario that caught them off guard before. The reader’s recognition, however, is doubled—ascertaining the entrapment of the present moment and the weakening of each of the character’s armor that enables the entrapment to take place at all. And it is at this point that Zenia’s tactics are laid bare. With her saccharine stories no longer working their seductive magic, Zenia simply unleashes brute and cruel verbal force. This is what she says to Tony: “You don’t believe me, do you. . . . Well, help yourself to some righteous indignation, you little snot. You always were the most awful two-faced hypocrite, Tony. A smug dog-in-the-manger prune-faced little shit with megalomaniac pretensions. You think you have some kind of adventurous mind, but spare me!” She goes on to reduce her work to a “warped little battle-scar collection” and strikes at her sexuality by claiming that she sits on West as if he were her “own fresh-laid . . . egg” and by announcing how sleeping with her must be like sleeping with a “gerbil” (457).

Just as Zenia’s tactics are laid bare in the text, so are the characters’ various missteps. At the novel’s outset, Zenia plays “aphid” to Tony’s soul long before Tony knows what is happening. It begins when Tony joins in Zenia’s judgmental comments on others. In finding herself excluded from Zenia’s judgments, Tony reflects how Zenia’s “contempt [is] a ‘work of art,’” how it is a “great privilege to find yourself excluded from it.” She feels “reprieved,” “vindicated,” “grateful”—as
she pads upstairs to her room to write Zenia a check (133). This slight weakening of her armor, this brief merging with Zenia, contributes to her doing what she most likely would never have done under other circumstances—write Zenia’s term paper for her, a clear violation of the academic honesty that Tony so values. It is not until the end, when Tony refuses to let Zenia move into her apartment, that she learns to maintain a boundary that more than likely keeps Zenia from wreaking havoc in Tony’s life yet again. When Zenia refers to the present Billy in third person, Charis sees what she is doing but ignores it and shifts the blame to Billy (253). Roz can hear Tony’s voice, “Zenia lies” (401), but she believes her anyway.²⁵

Power wields its own appeal. Zenia herself hints at this process, when she says of her mother who sold her into prostitution at age five, “I adored her” and then adds, “That is how she was able to get away with it” (183). Tnomerf Ynot, Tony’s alter ego, although destructive, is also freewheeling and alluring. In her imagined barbarian charge, Tnomerf Ynot’s “ragged hair” is “flying in the wind.” With Tnomerf Ynot in the lead, they are “sweeping all before them, trampling down crops and burning villages.” They “loot and plunder and smash pianos, and kill children.” They relish in the damage. “Tnomerf Ynot herself drinks from a skull, with silver handles attached where the ears used to be. She raises the skull high in a toast to victory, and to the war god of the barbarians: Ettovag! she yells, and the hordes answer, cheering: Ettovag! Ettovag” (163–64). It is that lure of power that each of the trio resists in the end when they choose not to kill Zenia—not to become her.²⁶

And that power is not just located in the personal; it extends into the global.²⁷ Note this description of Zenia: “Tony pictures her on a horse, cloak flying, a sword-arm raised; or as a bird, a silver and miraculous bird, rising triumphant and unscathed from the cinders of burning and plundered Europe” (184). Zenia here metamorphoses into a plane, most specifically into a bomber. Moreover, Zenia’s entrances are interspersed with global events. When Zenia strides past them as if they are invisible, she projects “the smell of scorched earth” (35): obliteration. Just before Tony recognizes Zenia at the Toxique, the discussion is focused on war and on imperial power—on how the United States welcomes Saddam Hussein’s crossing the border into Kuwait as an opportunity to try out their “new toys” (32). Tony comments: “The lust for power will prevail. Thousands will die needlessly. Corpses will rot. Women and children will perish. Plagues will rage. Famine will
sweep the land. Relief funds will be set up. Officials will siphon off the cash from them” (33).

This war, as it is seen through U.S. policy, however, is not war—just as Zenia is not seen for the havoc that she wreaks. These allusions to U.S. power and the first Gulf War, which are coterminal with the setting of the novel, become more explicit in the remaining incremental narratives of the Toxique. In pondering Tony’s reference to the Rubicon, Charis extends Tony’s reference to the violation of boundaries; the next moment, Zenia appears. Roz, in pondering the Rubicon, extends its meaning (when she is not thinking about lipstick) to overexpansion, the decline of empires; the next moment Zenia appears, “staking out territory” (111). It is a logical extension. Atwood, in her discussion of victim positions, notes: “The positions are the same whether you are a victimized country, a victimized minority group, or a victimized individual” (Survival 46). The first step in overcoming victimization (someone else’s abuse of power) is naming that condition; whether in the personal or political realm, the same processes apply.

When Zenia first resurrects herself in the Toxique, Tony, Roz, and Charis are discussing Gerald Bull, whose “life-time obsession was the construction of a ‘Supergun,’ a huge howitzer able to fire satellites into space or launch artillery shells thousands of miles into enemy territory” (FAS 1). The potential for destruction is clear: “Bull specialized in increasing the range of shells. He would improve their aerodynamics and would add bleeder charges to the bottom of the shells that would emit gas to fill the vacuum left behind a shell in flight” (Redford 2). Exploiting the concept of artillery range, Bull wanted a gun that exceeded the distance fired by the enemy, which means one could blow one’s enemy “to bits without risk to yourself” (ibid.)—a bit like Zenia.28 Bull’s life story itself is unusual and bears some uncanny resemblance to the stories surrounding Zenia: his childhood was considered “loveless”; his mother died when he was young; his father abandoned him; he was reared by an aunt; he was known for his exaggerated claims; and his obsession with the supergun did not spring from a “militarist” perspective—he “just found something he really loved doing,” the creation of power for power’s sake (Redford 1–2). It is this same Gerald Bull to whom Zenia claims to have had assassination ties at the end of the novel.

In the opening scenes at the Toxique where the women are discussing the first Gulf War, Roz asks, “Who’s going to win?” Tony responds, “The battle or the war?” And then continues: “For the battle, it'll
definitely be technology. Whoever’s got air superiority. Now who could that be?” (33). Although the United States clearly is deemed “winner of the battle,” the outcome of the war remains unknown—apocalyptic. Whatever power tactics can be discerned in Zenia’s maneuvers at the individual level can also be discerned at the national and global levels. And likewise, they serve as warnings. “The personal is not political, thinks Tony: the personal is military. War is what happens when language fails” (43). Zenia is the only one who does not tell her own story. She is, in effect, the failure of language and its result—war. The first Gulf War is “not a war” but “market expansion” (32). Zenia asks Tony what she would rather have from other people, “Love, respect or fear?” Tony at first replies “respect” and then changes her answer to “love.” Zenia retorts: “Not me. . . . I’d choose fear.” It is, Zenia maintains, “the only thing that works” (209). Zenia uses this strategy throughout the novel, which the reader should see long before Tony, Charis, and Roz do. Zenia does serve as warning in the personal realm, but she serves equally as warning in the political one. “The personal is military” (43). In other words, the power tactics wielded at the individual level function as a microcosm for global politics. 

Ironically, now a second Gulf War wages. It, too, is “not a war” but a “liberation.” (It is also “market expansion”—Halliburton’s extending control over Iraqi oil fields—but the American press rarely talks about that.) “War is what happens when language fails.” Zenia’s response privileging fear is purely Machiavellian—“shock and awe.” However Zenia is configured, her boundaries reach far beyond her body and her narrative—to a global narrative that is once again in full force. If Zenia’s enticement is, in part, an untrammeled jouissance that has eluded the fetters of the symbolic order (most specifically language), her roots, in Lacanian terms, remain in the imaginary, in the prelanguage state of unarticulated desire. She represents an imaginary unity gone twisted into a desire for control and power.29 What others see in Zenia, at least initially, is not her vacuity but the lure of power, however illusory. As a product of the individual and cultural imaginary, what and who she is becomes difficult to ascertain—what she represents in many ways is beyond words, beyond language. Any rational critique (for example, that there are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and never were) seems to pale. However, identifying with an untrammeled power/jouissance yields an imaginary acquisition of power, when, in reality, individual power is being siphoned away—which explains a lot about the 2004 U.S. elections. Recognize
the power tactics, the text urges, or as Atwood suggests in *Survival*, “Naming your own condition, your own disease, is not necessarily the same as acquiescing in it. Diagnosing it is the first step” (54). And that is all we have. Set boundaries on the exploitation of “raw” power. The injunction seems imperative—apocalyptic. “Who’s going to win?” Only the answer to the “battle” was given. Who is it that is poised to fall from that tower?30

Notes

1. See also Howells’s further commentary on *The Robber Bride*, in which she notes the significance of Zenia’s postcoloniality, her role as “nomadic subject” who causes Tony, Charis, and Roz to confront issues of ethnicity and an illusory nationality. See also Stein (99).

2. Zenia also shares with Moira the epitaph “the whore of Babylon.”

3. After Lucy disappears one day with no explanation, Lois, in a later reflection that tries to come to terms with Lucy’s disappearance, remarks: “But a dead person is a body; a body occupies space; it exists somewhere. You can see it, put it in a box, and bury it in the ground. But Lucy is not in a box, or in the ground. Because she is nowhere definite, she could be anywhere” (117). Similarly, when Zenia returns from the dead, Roz considers that “she might be anywhere” (116), and Tony likewise reflects that she is both everywhere and nowhere.

4. My thanks go to Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis for the suggestions included in this paragraph.

5. In contrast, Iris complains, “This, then, was where I was to grin and bear it—the bed I hadn’t quite made” (307).

6. Iris’s disagreeable treatment of Myra—made visible by her comments in the text as she accuses Myra of snooping after she’s dead—becomes even more disturbing upon Iris’s revelation that Myra could be her own half-sister.

7. Iris admits, “The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it. Impossible, of course” (95).

8. When Reenie meets Richard Griffen, she sneers, “He’s new money, any- how.” She insists, “it was a well-known fact that the Griffens were common as dirt” (175).

9. Iris’s father, shortly after her mother’s death, also asks Iris to “promise to look after Laura” (101). The two requests may have increased Iris’s jealousy of her sister.

10. Of course, it is possible that Laura kills herself because Iris has told her that Alex is dead.

11. Iris also sees a halo-light surrounding her sister the day of Laura’s suicide.

12. For example, Iris’s memoir is composed of language while Laura’s comprises primarily symbols: “Avilion, no, No, No. Sunnyside, No. Xanadu, no, No.

13. “The Z comes from the last part of Roz’s name, the en from the last part of Charis’s original name Karen and the ia from the last part of Tony’s real name Antonia” (Enos 14).

14. Bouson notes: “And thus Tony views Zenia as her own lawless, angry twin identity; Charis sees Zenia as her split-off vulnerable and enraged child-self, Karen; and Roz finds lodged in Zenia the envious and greedy aspects of her self she wants to deny” (151). Aguiar observes that each of the protagonists has a dream of fusion in which each merges with Zenia: “Tony sees West leaving with Zenia, but this Zenia has ‘gills,’ a reference to Tony’s nickname of ‘Guppy.’ Charis dreams that she merges with Zenia, representing her own fear of re-emerging with Karen. And Roz dreams that Roz is not only like her father, but that he/she makes reference to her Catholic upbringing. These dreams reunite the fragments of each protagonist’s separated past, joining split sides of each past. This integration is what ultimately enables each to confront Zenia and reclaim from Zenia that which belongs to her” (133).

15. Wilson is quoting Marie-Louise Von Franz’s Shadow of Evil in Fairy Tales (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1987), 105.

16. After the landlord evicts Tony and West, they paint the entire apartment with the required “proper paint” but in black. Zenia notes, “It will take him more than two coats to cover this.”

17. Call this a dialogue, if you will: Aguiar focuses on Zenia’s redemptive function; Raschke, although acknowledging that all three characters emerge as stronger, more complete individuals in the end, focuses on Zenia’s destructive influence—on recognizing it and naming it.

18. As many critics have noted, Zenia, although a storyteller, does not tell her own story. And that difference is indeed part of what sets Zenia apart, but not entirely. Lucy in “Death by Landscape” does not tell her own story, and she evokes a positive energy in the end—“currents of energy, charged with violent color” (118).

19. Zenia also tells West a different version of her heritage that mirrors his need to be a white knight in shining armor. For West, she is the sexually abused victim of a Greek Orthodox priest.

20. Jean Wyatt in her reading of The Robber Bride makes a useful distinction between jealousy and envy: “As Melanie Klein established, envy rests on a two-person rather than a three-person dynamic. While jealousy pivots on the rivalry for a third person, the object of desire, envy is the wish to be in the other’s place. ‘Envy is about being, not having,’ as Jessica Benjamin succinctly puts it. In The Robber Bride each of the characters wants to be Zenia” (37). Although I agree with both Wyatt’s definition and interpretation, I contend that Zenia is the figure who most dramatizes the dynamics of envy.

21. Wyatt contends that under “the old rules,” women battled for a man and in this competition viewed other women as “potential enemies,” as “threat[s]” to their “well-being.” The battleground, however, is now shifting. Referring to a previous dynamic in her article, Wyatt notes, “the female academics quoted above are not competing with women in the old way for a man; rather they envy other women for what they are, for their accomplishments or their positions of power” (54).
22. For all three women, Zenia does promise, as Wyatt suggests, the opportunity of wholeness, and she does serve, as Aguiar suggests, as a means of recovering the repressed aspects of the self.

23. See also Cynthia Kuhn, who notes the impact of this change as well: from one that emphasized intellectual content to one that embraces a “Glamour- or Cosmopolitan-like format” (70).

24. Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis notes that Roz’s refusal of Zenia is more tenuous than others’ in that she “buys time” (165–66).

25. This denial, which is enacted by all three characters, is what Atwood describes as Position One in the Basic Victim Positions in Survival. The driving force behind Position One is denial (46).

26. Some argue that Zenia’s triple death (her falling from the tower, her ovarian cancer, and her heroin overdose) corresponds with each of the three women having a part in Zenia’s death. Such a literal reading does not play out. The three’s foiled murders, which emerge as more comical than anything (e.g., Tony with a gun and a cordless grill), do not display the malice or the nastiness that usually is associated with envy. Moreover, the determined cause of death was the heroine overdose, not the fall from the tower, which was the only possible link to causality: producing a heroin overdose and ovarian cancer are not within the trio’s scope. What they do kill is Zenia’s power over them.

27. With the exception of Cora Ann Howells’s discussion of Zenia as a Western blight and Karen Stein’s noting her associations with war, most interpretations of Zenia locate her effects in the personal. Although Stein notes Zenia’s connections with war (“She reappears on the eve of the Gulf War, her childhood stories are associated with war, and her connections with the three friends grow from war stories”), she sees Zenia’s function quite differently: “Thus Zenia offers each a new story, a new interpretation of the past that may release them from the old stories that keep them in victim positions” (102).

28. These superguns, moreover, were designed to have the potential of “firing chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons to the range of up to 1,000 kilometers.” Although this dream weapon was not manufactured, smaller versions were (GH-N-45 and G-5), the latter having the capacity to deliver both a tactical nuclear warhead and chemical shells (FAS 1). Bull sold this technology to Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war to further Iraq’s ability to thwart Israel and to enable Iraq to “join the club of major nuclear powers.” This particular use of the supergun became known specifically as Project Babylon (Redford 3).

29. Lacan theorizes that the prelanguage state, what he calls the imaginary, is marked by an imagined unity with the world. Thus, the child imagines itself as part of everything in its world. The shift from the imaginary order to the symbolic order is marked by an entry into language. It is coterminous with the mirror stage in which the child also imagines a projected future-perfect “I,” or a unified and mastered self., which is also illusory—what Lacan calls méconnaissance. I theorize that the future-perfect “I” is also beyond language, that the imaginary fusion the child experiences in the imaginary stage is transposed onto an imagined all-powerful sense of the self.

30. “A rejection of war games” is the essence of Position Four in Atwood’s victim positions (Survival 76).
Works Cited


