

**MARGARET ATWOOD'S VISIONS AND REVISIONS OF
THE WIZARD OF OZ**

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ABSTRACT. *L. Frank Baum's The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900) and Victor Fleming's film The Wizard of Oz (1939) play an important intertextual role in Margaret Atwood's critical and fictional writings. Atwood has often been inspired by both versions of this modern fairy tale and has drawn attention to the main issues it raises (e.g. the transformative power of words, gendered power relationships, the connection between illusion and reality, the perception of the artist as a magician, and different notions of home). She has creatively explored and exploited themes, settings, visual motifs, allegorical content and characters (Dorothy, her three companions, the Wizard and the witches, especially Glinda the Good and the Wicked Witch of the West), subversively adapting her literary borrowings with a parodic twist and satirical intent. Parts of Life Before Man (1979) may be interpreted as a rewrite of a story defined by Atwood as "the great American witchcraft classic".*

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Life Before Man*, fairy tales, intertextuality, parody.

VISIONES Y REVISIONES DE *EL MAGO DE OZ* EN LA OBRA DE MARGARET ATWOOD

RESUMEN. *La novela de L. Frank Baum El maravilloso mago de Oz (1900) y la versión cinematográfica dirigida por Victor Fleming El mago de Oz (1939) desempeñan una importante función intertextual en las obras críticas y de ficción publicadas por Margaret Atwood. A menudo Atwood se inspira en ambas versiones de este cuento de hadas moderno y presta atención a las principales cuestiones planteadas por él (por ejemplo, el poder transformador de las palabras, las relaciones de poder asociadas al género, el juego entre ilusión y realidad, la percepción del artista como mago y los diferentes conceptos del hogar). Atwood ha explorado y utilizado de forma muy creativa determinados temas, escenarios, motivos visuales, el contenido alegórico y los personajes (Dorothy, sus tres compañeros, el Mago y las brujas, especialmente Glinda la Bruja Buena y la Malvada Bruja del Oeste), adaptando subversivamente sus préstamos literarios con giros paródicos e intención satírica. Cabe interpretar algunas secciones de La vida antes del hombre (1979) como reescrituras de un cuento que Atwood definió como “el gran clásico americano de la brujería”.*

Palabras clave: Margaret Atwood, *El Mago de Oz*, *La vida antes del hombre*, cuentos de hadas, intertextualidad, parodia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) and the 1939 Victor Fleming¹ film based on this book have engaged Margaret Atwood's imagination since her childhood and have provided a rich source of inspiration for both her critical and fictional writings. Atwood has often referred to the themes and the main characters of this popular story as well as drawn quotes from the book and the film. Moreover, she has creatively exploited some prominent visual motifs, such as the grayness of the Kansas environment in contrast with the greenness of the Emerald City of Oz, the yellow brick road, the melting of the Wicked Witch of the West, Dorothy's whirlwind-borne house, and the magical ruby slippers worn by Judy Garland in the MGM film (which, in fact, correspond to the silver shoes of the novel).

Through her articles and book reviews Atwood offers a great deal of information about what *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has meant for her over the years. In the volume entitled *In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and the Human Imagination*

¹ Although Victor Fleming is the credited director, it should be pointed out that four directors participated in the making of the 1939 Hollywood production.

(2011) she notes that she read L. Frank Baum's book at an early age and records how impressed she had been by the scene in which "the wizard goes soaring away in a basket lifted by an enormous hot-air balloon" (17). Additionally, she indicates that this tale was at the time one of the sources of her core ideas about superpowers (18). In an interview conducted in 1979 she had observed that in many fairy tales "women rather than men have the magic powers" (Hammond 1990: 115), an aspect which perhaps underlies her continuous attraction to Baum, because his story exemplifies precisely the feature so highly praised by Atwood. Undoubtedly, in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* it is the Witches and Dorothy – the latter thanks to wearing the silver shoes handed to her by Glinda the Good – that exercise genuine magic powers, whereas those claimed by the Wizard turn out to be false.

Atwood is not the only contemporary writer to have openly acknowledged Baum's influence on their own fiction. Likewise, Salman Rushdie has explained the significance of *The Wizard of Oz* for his literary career, recalling how at the age of ten, while still living in Bombay, he wrote his first story, entitled "Over the Rainbow". At the beginning of his essay *The Wizard of Oz: A Short Text about Magic* he affirmed: "I remember that *The Wizard of Oz* – the film, not the book, which I didn't read as a child – was my very first literary influence" (1992: 9). Then, he went even further in his tribute by declaring: "When I first saw *The Wizard of Oz* it made a writer of me" (18). Unlike Rushdie, Atwood first read the book and later saw the film. Though both the book and its 1939 cinematic adaptation are equally relevant to the development of her writings, neither has played for her the central role that Rushdie – when measuring the impact of this story upon his work – assigned to the film, which he considered "one of the rare instances of a film improving on a good book" (14). In her case, the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers have probably played a more crucial part than *The Wizard of Oz*. Yet her comments on how she learned about the transformative power of words while reading an unexpurgated edition of the *Grimms' Fairy Tales* in the 1940s can be applied to her approach to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in the same period. She ended her contribution to *The Reception of Grimms' Fairy Tales* with the following question: "And where else could I have gotten the idea, so early in life, that words can change you?" (1993: 292). There are reasons to believe that the transformative power of language she found in the *Grimms' Fairy Tales* was not restricted to them, but extended to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (see Tatar 2010: 60-63).

In order to ascertain the extent of Atwood's literary debt to *The Wizard of Oz*, we must survey her fiction in search of quotes, echoes and allusions so as to trace how she has adapted, refashioned and reinvented Baum's story. But, if we want to

make a complete assessment, we should examine her critical writings beforehand, because they contain pertinent hints about her borrowings. In particular, her remarks about the manner in which other authors may have rewritten *The Wizard of Oz* – either deliberately or unintentionally – will guide our exploration.

2. *THE WIZARD OF OZ* IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S LITERARY AND SOCIAL CRITICISM

There is much to be learned about Atwood's attitude to *The Wizard of Oz* by scrutinizing her articles, book reviews and published lectures. One soon realizes how she sometimes takes for granted that all her readers are familiar with the fairy tale whereas on other occasions she deems it necessary to summarize its plot, give a brief outline of its characters and explain some of its details as if to make sure that no one will miss the background information essential to understanding what she means. She probably assumes that many of her readers are not acquainted with the book, but only with the MGM film, which was released during World War II (in 1939, exactly the year Atwood was born) and is still considered one of the best known and beloved in cinema history, one whose fame extended well beyond America's borders.

Atwood's literary and social criticism signals the facets of *The Wizard of Oz* she considers worthy of attention, including the existence of good witches, a subject which many early readers of the tale found disturbing. Those who assume that all witches should be considered wicked are upset by the presence of the Good Witch of the South, Glinda the Good, "the most powerful of all the Witches" (1900: 215). But, rather than being keen on discussing the goodness or the wickedness of witches, Atwood prefers to concentrate on issues of power. Witches are frequently on her mind because of her longtime interest in exploring power relationships in general and gendered power relationships in particular. Indeed, she sees witchcraft and power as inextricably linked. For instance, in an address entitled "Witches", delivered in 1980 and reprinted in the volume *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (1982), she explained witch-hunting as "an attempt by the powerful to control the potentially subversive" (332). Then, in her 1984 review of John Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick*, a novel which connects witchcraft with feminism via its female protagonists (three divorced feminists who gain evil magical powers when they achieve independence but lose them when they remarry), Atwood clearly expressed an idea which would become recurrent whenever she addressed the topic of witches in her literary and social criticism: "What a culture has to say about witchcraft, whether in jest or in earnest, has a lot to do with its views of sexuality and power, and especially with the apportioning of powers between the sexes"

(2005: 9).² Using her emblematic anti-patriarchal satirical tone to appraise Updike's anti-feminist satirical novel, Atwood suggested that *The Witches of Eastwick* could be interpreted as a rewrite of *The Wizard of Oz*.³ Hailing Baum's tale as "the great American witchcraft classic" (2005: 9), she summarized its plot and set some of its characters in contrast with Updike's:

In the original, a good little girl and her familiar, accompanied by three amputated males, one sans brain, one sans heart and one sans guts, go seeking a wizard who turns out to be a charlatan. The witches in "Oz" really have superhuman powers, but the male figures do not. Mr. Updike's Land of Oz is the real America, but the men in it need a lot more than self-confidence; there's no Glinda the Good, and the Dorothy-like ingenue is a "wimp" who gets her comeuppance. It's the three witches of Eastwick who go back, in the end, to the equivalent of Kansas - marriage, flat and gray maybe, but at least known. (2005: 9)

Atwood's review of *The Witches of Eastwick* can be fruitfully analyzed in relation with her review of *The Echo Maker*, entitled "In the Heart of the Heartland" (2006). Here she speculates at length about "the possible connection" between Richard Powers's novel and *The Wizard of Oz* – both the book and the film version – to which she pays detailed attention. She begins her discussion by quoting two well-known "snippets" drawn from the children's tale and interprets them as "clues to Powers's intentions". Then she highlights the context in which Baum's book was written: "the rise of feminism and the advent of Darwinism – hence those power-packed witches and winged monkeys". After giving a summary of *The Wizard of Oz*, she proposes that one may find in *The Echo Maker* the counterparts for Dorothy (through the ironic figure of Karin), the girl's three companions (Mark, Daniel and Robert Karsh), the Wizard (Dr. Weber), Glinda the Good and the Wicked Witch of the West (both of them blended in Barbara) and even the winged monkeys (Mark's sometimes destructive and sometimes helpful pals). The Nebraska depicted in *The Echo Maker* can be matched in some ways with Kansas, but in other ways with the Land of Oz and its Emerald City. The main parallelisms between the two novels are succinctly recapitulated by Atwood in the following words: "Deficient males, powerful females, in a land of imitations, in the heart of the heartland of America". Curiously enough, Salman Rushdie had reached a similar conclusion when he wrote about the distribution of power between the

² A number of characters in Atwood's fiction also voice (albeit sometimes humorously) the author's concerns in this area. For example, the focalizer of "Isis in Darkness", a short story included in the volume *Wilderness Tips* (1991), has only published two papers in his unproductive academic career, one of them on "witchcraft as sexual metaphor" (74).

³ This is one of the many instances in which Atwood, instead of using the full original title of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, refers to Baum's book as *The Wizard of Oz*, which is also the title of the 1939 film.

sexes in *The Wizard of Oz*: “The power of men, it is suggested, is illusory; the power of women is real” (1992: 42).

In her Introduction to *Women Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews* (1989), a collection of interviews with women writers, Atwood explained why some people avoid an interview with the author of a book they admire. She observed that those who “have a superstition about peeking” (2005: 80) may refrain from satisfying their curiosity because they want to avert disenchantment. In order to illustrate her point, she turned to a famous scene: “As Dorothy discovered in *The Wizard of Oz*, the fire that burns yet is not consumed may turn out to be – much to our disappointment – just a trick pulled by some wizened old fraud from Kansas” (2005: 80). This is one of Atwood’s references which give us just a glimpse into *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, but on other occasions she devotes rather thorough attention to this classic of children’s literature. For example, in the fourth chapter of *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), a book which grew out of the six Empson Lectures she delivered at the University of Cambridge in the year 2000, she considers how every artist works in “relation to the outside world – to what we call society” (97). Starting from a quotation of Gwendolyn MacEwen, “Poets are magicians without quick wrists”, Atwood notes the similarities between the artist figure and “three fictional characters, all of them quasi-magicians” who have in common an existence “at the intersection of art with power, and therefore with moral and social responsibility” (2002: 111). One of these three illusionists is the Wizard of Oz, whom she likens to the artist because both of them are magicians “creating illusions that can convince people of their truth” (2002: 113). Focusing on the scene in which Dorothy told the Wizard of Oz that he was a “very bad man” and he replied “I’m really a very good man; but I’m a very bad Wizard” (Baum 1900: 187), Atwood remarks that “moral perfection won’t compensate for your badness as an artist”, although moral goodness and badness is “*not* beside the point if you happen to be a good *wizard*” (2002: 113). Atwood defines the book’s title character as a “*soi-disant* magician, wielder of power, manipulator, illusionist, and fraud” (2002: 113) before she goes on to trace his long genealogy of ancestors – including Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus and Prospero of *The Tempest* – who combined these functions.

In her 2002 review of *Tishomingo Blues*, Atwood compared Tunica, Mississippi, as depicted by Elmore Leonard with the Emerald City of Oz, which she branded as “a city of illusions controlled by a scam artist who deceives people and holds out false promises” (2005: 231). “The connection between illusion and reality, lie and truth—and also the gap between them”, identified by Atwood as “one of the leitmotifs that runs through *Tishomingo Blues*” (2005: 231) although not explicitly related to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, must have been one of the reasons which

prompted her to refer to Baum's tale because it is one of the main themes that both novels have in common.

The Richard Ellmann Lectures in Modern Literature, delivered by Atwood in 2010 and published as the three first chapters of her volume *In Other Worlds*, gave her an opportunity to briefly put Baum's tale in a place of honor, next to Shakespeare's plays. Among the many examples of flying non-humans acting as messenger-servants for humans which can be found in world literature – including Puck, Ariel, Eros (or Cupid) and the djinni of *A Thousand and One Nights* – she cited “the winged monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*: airborne, powerful, hard to control except through magic” (2011: 34). In her third lecture, while reflecting on her unfinished Ph.D. thesis – which was about the nineteenth and early twentieth-century fictions she collected under the label of “Metaphysical Romance” – she alluded to the fighting trees in the nineteenth chapter of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (the ones invested with the power to keep strangers out of the forest) as prototypes of “hostile trees” along the same lines as those of *The Lord of the Rings* (2011: 80).

In 2012, when Atwood wrote “SURVIVAL: A Demi-Memoir”, a new preface for her thematic guide to Canadian Literature (first published in 1972), she commented on “the raucous though unlikely success of *Survival*” which, according to the author, caused her “to morph overnight from a lady poet with peculiar hair to the Wicked Witch of the North” (2012a: v). By using this epithet, she took the liberty of departing from Baum's story by humorously presenting herself as the *Wicked Witch of the North*, rather than as the *Good Witch of the North* which appears in the tale together with three other witches: the Good Witch of the South, and the two Wicked Witches, one of the East and one of the West. Apart from the obvious reference to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, in Atwood's amusing self-definition as the Wicked Witch of the North we can also identify an allusion to her national identity if we bear in mind her strong sense of Canada as a northern country. In addition, the ironical self-deprecation of this comic verbal image can be related to an equally comic pictorial image. Atwood had already made fun of herself posing as a witch in a caricature dated in 2005, when she drew her long nose and voluminous hair, and placed an A (that is, the first letter of the alphabet and her own initial) on her head as if it were a peaked hat very much like the one worn by the Wicked Witch of the West in the MGM film.⁴

⁴ The caricature has been reproduced on the front cover of *Margaret Atwood: A Reference Guide 1988-2005* (Hengen 2007). In “Witches” Atwood stated how proud she felt that her “favourite ancestor”, Mary Webster, who was accused of witchcraft in the seventeenth century, survived after being hanged from a tree (1982: 331). She wrote the poem “Half-Hanged Mary” (1995) in her honor. Mary Webster was one of the two people to whom Atwood dedicated *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a novel in which the Salem witch trials are evoked. The other person was Perry Miller, the Harvard professor who taught

In Ray Bradbury's obituary Atwood mentioned *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* twice. Her first reference was to the melting of the Wicked Witch of the West: "People don't die as such in his work; or they don't die in the ordinary way. Sometimes they melt – the Martian in the story of that name dissolves, like the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, one of Bradbury's influences" (2012b). Her second reference was to the farmhouse swept away by the cyclone and carried from Kansas to the magical Land of Oz: "Space ships are not miracles of technology, but psychic conveyances, serving the same purpose as Dorothy's whirlwind-borne house in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, or the trance of the traditional shaman: they get you to the Otherworld". Both remarks are appropriate in this eulogy not only because Bradbury singled out Baum's story as one of his sources of inspiration, but also because he had written the foreword for the Kansas Centennial Edition.

The Tin Woodman makes a swift appearance in "Are Humans Necessary? Margaret Atwood on Our Robotic Future" (2014), an article published in *The New York Times*. Here Atwood refers to the Tin Woodman as "a character whose influence on the world of robots has not been duly recognized" and rightly points out that Hugo the Robot in the story "The Perfect Servant" looks very much like him.

Three days after the results of the 2016 American presidential elections were known, Atwood published "Just like the Wizard of Oz, Donald Trump has no magic powers", a scathing satirical article in which she addressed her bewildered Martian friends, rather than the equally bewildered readers of *The Guardian*.⁵ In her imaginary speech, the immediate aftermath of the Republican victory is explained to the extraterrestrials in terms of the 1939 *The Wizard of Oz* film. The "wizard who claims to have huge and magical powers but who turns out to be a fraud" stands for Donald Trump, the new president-elect. Furthermore, Atwood humorously recalls how Hillary Clinton was "branded as the Wicked Witch of the West" during the campaign, but suggests that the Democratic contender "may actually have been Glinda the Good". The voting public is symbolized by Dorothy, to whom everything appeared to be green in the Emerald City of Oz because she had "put on the glasses of illusion" and now cannot get back to normal life because she has no magical ruby slippers.⁶ Although a highly desired happy ending such as the one in the film

Atwood about the American Puritans (some of whom were her forebears) and helped her discover the roots of totalitarianism in the United States.

⁵ Atwood had used a similar device in "Hello, Martians. Let Moby-Dick Explain", a very amusing article written as a reported conversation with a group of Martians in which she argued, providing examples, that the essence of America can be best discovered through its literature (2012c).

⁶ Although Atwood specifically tells her Martian audience that she will refer to the film, in fact the detail about the green-tinted glasses is drawn from the novel. On the other hand, the ruby slippers only appear in the film, instead of the silver shoes of the novel.

does not seem to be at hand, the author concludes: "All may yet be well, in the long run", considering that "less than half of America's voters chose the false wizard". In this opinion article Atwood shows her ability to expand the subversive potential of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, reiterating Baum's intention to satirize authority through the character of whom he calls "the false Wizard" twice (1900: 186 and 189). What is more, her witty references to the current political scene in America are in tune with former interpretations of the story as a cleverly crafted political parable or a monetary allegory rather than just "a modernized fairy tale" "written solely to please children of today", as Baum claimed in his Introduction (1900: 5).⁷

3. INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCES TO *THE WIZARD OF OZ* IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S FICTION

Frank Baum's book and the 1939 MGM film are primary intertexts in Atwood's *Life Before Man* (1979), a novel which is conventionally realistic on the surface, but contains so many elements of fantasy underneath that it may be interpreted as a modern anti-fairy tale.⁸ *Life Before Man* underscores the dreary aspects and the spiritual emptiness of the modern urban world by focusing on the day-to-day lives of three characters – Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje – over a span of about two years, between 1976 and 1978.⁹ Atwood's novel is set in Toronto, a city described in terms strikingly similar to the ones of the bleak Kansas farm where the plot of

⁷ In a highly controversial and much debated article, Henry M. Littlefield put forward an interpretation of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a political parable on late-nineteenth-century American Populism, contending that "Dorothy is Baum's Miss Everyman" (1964: 52) and that the Wizard "might be any President from Grant to McKinley" (54). Hugh Rockoff, interpreting Baum's tale as a monetary allegory, argued that "Dorothy represents America – honest, kindhearted, and plucky" (1990: 745). Discussing whether Baum deliberately meant to write a political allegory is beyond the scope of this article. The point I want to make is that the children's story can both work as a political allegory for an adult readership and inspire new allegories which may be useful for political commentary such as Atwood's.

⁸ Carol L. Beran was probably the first scholar to draw attention to *The Wizard of Oz* as one of the many sources of references which "combine to create a rich cultural context for Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man* (1979)" (1992: 199). Sharon Rose Wilson thoroughly examined *The Wizard of Oz* and the 1939 film as major intertexts in *Life Before Man* and established numerous correspondences (1993: 165-184). Other scholars, however, overlooking the influence of fairy tales, have discussed *Life Before Man* as "Atwood's first attempt at social and domestic realism" (Grace 1980: 135) and as a "novel of manners" (Goetsch 1985: 137).

⁹ The novel is divided into five parts, which contain a total of 59 sections, all of them dated as entries in a journal. They are arranged chronologically from October 29, 1976 until August 18, 1978, with some flashbacks. Each of these sections is told by a third-person narrator alternatively using as a focalizer one of the three main characters, whose name heads the section. This technical device allows readers to compare the perspectives of Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje, who have different perceptions and interpretations of the same people, facts and events.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz begins. The grayness of the first setting presented in Baum's fairy tale is an important feature that cannot possibly be overlooked, because the word "gray" is repeated ten times in the rather short initial chapter of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The dull atmosphere of the little farm in the midst of the desolate Kansas prairies is visually conveyed in the film by the choice of a brownish sepia tone for the opening and the ending scenes, an effect which is enhanced by the stark contrast with the vibrant technicolor scenes that take place in the magical Land of Oz in the central part of the film. Everything is gray in the Kansas farm described by Baum:

When Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great *gray* prairie on every side. Not a tree nor a house broke the broad sweep of flat country that reached the edge of the sky in all directions. The sun had baked the plowed land into a *gray* mass, with little cracks running through it. Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same *gray* color to be seen everywhere. Once the house had been painted, but the sun blistered the paint and the rains washed it away, and now the house was as dull and *gray* as everything else. (1900: 12, emphasis added)

Not only the landscape and the farmhouse have turned gray, but even people have been transformed by the inclement weather, except for Dorothy, who was saved by her black dog Toto "from growing as gray as her other surroundings" (13). The once beautiful Aunt Em has lost her former liveliness to the point that her lips are not red, nor even pink, but as gray as her eyes, which no longer shine: "When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young pretty wife. The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober *gray*; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were *gray* also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled now" (12, emphasis added).

As for Uncle Henry, he "never laughed" and "was *gray* also, from his long beard to his rough boots" (13, emphasis added). Likewise, in *Life Before Man* we find a group of gray characters in the equally gray urban setting of Toronto. The association of Elizabeth, one of the three protagonists of Atwood's novel, with the color gray is emphasized by the triple repetition of the word to describe her sofa in the first paragraph of one of the early sections of the novel: "Elizabeth sits on the *grey* sofa [...]. The sofa is not really *grey*, not only *grey*; it has a soft mauve underfigure, a design like veining; a batik. She chose it because it did not hurt her eyes" (23, emphasis added).

Apart from deliberately choosing a gray shade for her sofa, "Elizabeth sits on the *grey* bench in the Ossington subway station" (99, emphasis added). At home, in the midst of an emotional crisis, she observes how "the cracks between the boards of the table are widening; *grey* light wells from them, cold" (205, emphasis

added). After her mother's funeral, her Auntie Muriel brings home the flowers – “greyish chrysanthemums” and “festering gladioli” – thus making Elizabeth feel that “the house stinks of death” (177-178, emphasis added). Depressed and anxious, Elizabeth is surrounded by a gray atmosphere not only when she is indoors, either at her own home or in Auntie Muriel's house, but also when she goes outdoors. The first sentence of the next section of the novel reiterates the overwhelming presence of the color gray: “Elizabeth walks west, along the north side of the street, in the cold *grey* air that is an extension of the unbroken *fish-grey* sky” (57, emphasis added).¹⁰ Although she generally wears black, she attends one particular dinner “wearing a loose *grey* chiffon number” (153, emphasis added). Being uninterested in politics, she does not care who wins in the elections, because she perceives the candidates as “collections of *grey* dots” (59, emphasis added).

Early in the novel, Elizabeth's husband, Nate, “runs for pleasure, taking it easy, jogging over dying grass *grey* in the street lights” (47, emphasis added), an image which reminds us of how “even the grass was not green” in the Kansas prairies of the fairy tale (1900: 12). Two pages below, Nate imagines his wife “inside the *grey* buildings” of the Royal Ontario Museum where she works (49, emphasis added). The grayness of the building is emphasized as the third protagonist of the novel, Lesje, “climbs the *grey* steps of the Museum” when tracing her daily path to her office (208, emphasis added). Lesje's family name, Green, is meant to be understood ironically as an allusion to the fact that greenness is completely absent from her ordinary life (91). Greenness is only present in the daydreams of this young paleontologist who seeks refuge in the intensely chromatic world of prehistory. “She mixes eras and adds colors: why not a metallic blue Stegosaurus with red and yellow dots instead of the dull greys and browns postulated by the experts?” (18-19). Lesje mentally resurrects a number of multicolored prehistoric animals, dismissing the gray shades of the plastic models “made in Hong Kong” (144) because she knows better: “Only when the camptosaurus are dead do they turn *grey*” (19, emphasis added).

If Lesje travels in time to the prehistoric past in order to evade the dullness of her present reality, Elizabeth only sees the four symbolic colors of the four regions of the Land of Oz when she looks at paintings, such as the one on the refrigerator of her kitchen, drawn by her daughter Nancy, in which “a girl smiles a red smile, the sun shines, bestowing spokes of yellow; the sky is blue, all is as it should be. A foreign country” (37).¹¹ But the innocent child's colorful painting,

¹⁰ The grayness of the sky is emphasized in the first chapter of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, as follows: “Uncle Henry sat upon the doorstep and looked anxiously at the sky, which was even grayer than usual” (1900: 13).

¹¹ In the first section of the novel there is a clear indication of the absence of bright colors in Elizabeth's

which is also described by Lesje later in the novel (169), ends up causing Elizabeth to have an ominous hallucination. Apart from seeing “malice” in “the yellow hair” of the girl, she imagines how the yellow “sun is blackening” and fancies that, rather than the “white enamel” of the refrigerator, “the dark of outer space” is behind the blue sky, which is just “an illusion” (205).

Nancy’s painting can be compared with the picture which attracts Elizabeth’s attention in the last episode of the novel, while she is paying a visit to an exhibition about contemporary China. Looking at the picture, she observes some “bright green leaves spread with the harmonious asymmetry of a Chinese floral rug; purple fruits glow among them” (315). She feels strongly moved by the sight of this idealized representation, and although she interprets such a utopic vision as communist propaganda, “she longs to be there” (317). The closing words of the novel show that the last movement of Elizabeth’s imagination is not towards home, like Dorothy’s, but towards this fake version of China, conceptualized as a sort of Land of Oz, a wonderful world full of illusion and fantasy. Nevertheless, we are given to understand that the actual physical step which Elizabeth will take next, once the novel is finished, will be towards the supermarket, “since there’s nothing in the house for dinner” (317). Having evaded the dull world of reality for a short while, Elizabeth will certainly go back to her daily routine with her two daughters who are waiting for her, very much like Dorothy returned to the home she had missed so much.

Throughout her life, Elizabeth identifies with the iconic character of Dorothy in many respects. Both girls are orphans entrusted to an uncle and an aunt. The word “orphan” is only mentioned once in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* – “Dorothy, who was an orphan” (12) – and also only once in relation to Elizabeth in *Life Before Man*, when she notes that, in spite of being already an adult mother of two children, whenever she is with Auntie Muriel she “is still part child. Part prisoner, part orphan, part cripple, part insane” (123). Having been abandoned by her father and left in the care of an alcoholic mother who was unable to take charge of her two daughters, Elizabeth lived as an orphan with her uncle and aunt even before the untimely death of her mother. Dorothy’s Aunt Em and Elizabeth’s Auntie Muriel share certain features, such as the same inability to smile.¹² As Aunt Em’s gray eyes have lost their “sparkle” (1900: 12), they resemble those of Auntie Muriel, which are “like two pieces of gravel, cold

life: “But when she thinks about food she doesn’t see the bright colors, red, green, orange, featured in the *Gourmet Cookbook*” (13).

¹² Atwood draws attention to Dorothy’s “gray, unsmiling Auntie” in her review of *The Echo Maker* (2006). Cf. Aunt Em “never smiled, now” (Baum 1900: 12). In *Life Before Man* Aunt Muriel smiles at Elizabeth only once, but hers is “a disquieting smile” (1984: 217).

and unreflecting" (1984: 119), "pebble-colored eyes" (263). But the similarities between Aunt Em and Auntie Muriel stop here, because Elizabeth invariably perceives her Auntie Muriel as the Wicked Witch of the West. Her childhood fantasy is recalled as follows: "Auntie Muriel was the Witch, of course. Elizabeth's mother was Glinda the Good. One day she would reappear and kneel down to kiss Elizabeth on the forehead" (139). Elizabeth's idealized notion of a biological maternal figure leads her to expect a protective kiss like the one which Dorothy received from the Good Witch of the North in Baum's fairy tale (1900: 27), but from Glinda the Good – who is the Good Witch of the South – according to the 1939 cinematic version of the story.¹³

This dichotomy of evil and goodness is so deeply ingrained in Elizabeth's mind that it persists even when she realizes that it must be false. In one of the sections of the novel where Elizabeth is used as the focalizer of the story, the third-person narrator remarks: "Elizabeth knows her view of Auntie Muriel is exaggerated and uncharitable. Such ogres don't exist" (119). Although Elizabeth blames her aunt by saying that there are "no shades of grey" for her because she is "a purist as well as a puritan" (138), in fact it is the niece herself who paradoxically cannot perceive the "shades of grey" in Auntie Muriel's behavior. When Elizabeth was a young girl, she used to "put herself to sleep with a scene from *The Wizard of Oz* [...] the part where Dorothy throws a bucket of water over the Wicked Witch of the West and melts her" (139). As a mature woman, Elizabeth visits Auntie Muriel wasting away from cancer in a hospital, and sees that at last her childhood fantasy has turned real: the dying old lady is "falling in on herself, she's melting, like the witch in *The Wizard of Oz*" (279). However, far from being relieved by the disappearance of the aunt she so much hates, Elizabeth feels terrified and immediately remembers that Dorothy was very much afraid when the Wicked Witch of the West melted like brown sugar before her eyes.¹⁴ But Elizabeth has a different reason to be frightened: the sight of death increases her consciousness of her aging self, and she realises that she has already begun to melt like the candles on her birthday cake and the melting woman in one of the pictures in Nancy's *Little Riddle Book* (252).¹⁵

¹³ This detail proves that Elizabeth has drawn the scene of the protective kiss from the film, not from the book.

¹⁴ L. Frank Baum had written: "Dorothy, who was truly frightened to see the Witch actually melting away like brown sugar before her very eyes" (1900: 154). Atwood closely followed Baum's text when she wrote: "Dorothy was not jubilant when the witch turned into a puddle of brown sugar. She was terrified" (1984: 279).

¹⁵ Nancy's *Little Riddle Book* contains another two pictures illustrating riddles related to death: one of a coffin and one of an hourglass which makes Elizabeth feel the sands of time running out for her inside her own body "from her head down to her feet" (1984: 89).

If L. Frank Baum's authorial choice to create a protagonist who is an adopted orphan has earned him a place – however small – in the tradition of orphan-girl fiction, Atwood's exploration of the relationship between Elizabeth and Auntie Muriel may be regarded as a parody of the portrayal of the relationships between adoptee and adoptive parent both in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and in the turn-of-the-century orphan-girl novels.¹⁶ Though Baum does not stick to the typical plot of these extremely popular novels, since his protagonist's progress evolves while being away from her adoptive parents, his happy ending conforms to the readers' expectations. It has been argued that "Baum's text not only advocates sentimental adoption but also educates readers about its psychological ramifications" (Taylor 2009: 381). According to this interpretation, "Dorothy's adventures represent the journey toward self-integration" achieved through a metaphorical quest which begins in Kansas, then follows across the Land of Oz and successfully ends back in Kansas (Taylor 2009: 381). Dorothy's quest allows her to define home as where Aunt Em dwells and where the girl is determined to return for the reasons summed up in her sentence "There is no place like home" (1900: 45). The affectionate welcome which Dorothy receives from Aunt Em once she completes her journey confirms for her the rightness of her decision to come back home (1900: 260). Conversely, Elizabeth always depicts Auntie Muriel's house as where she hated to be when she was a child and where she does not want to return as a grown up. Elizabeth's sarcasm when dealing with issues related to Auntie Muriel, with whom she is in permanent conflict, is the antithesis of Dorothy's sentimentality regarding Aunt Em.

Elizabeth's numerous references to *The Wizard of Oz* attest to the significant impact the tale has had and continues to have on her life, because she remembers the book well although it was left behind when she moved to Aunt Muriel's (139). But rather than showing reverence, she tends to display a sardonic attitude towards the much-acclaimed story. For instance, rehearsing the conversation she plans to have with a psychiatrist, but which never happens because she cancels the appointment, Elizabeth says in what becomes an interior monologue: "I've already been down this particular yellow brick road a couple of times, and what I found out mostly was that there's no Wizard of Oz" (99). By mocking "the road of yellow brick that led to the Emerald City" "where the Great Oz dwelt" in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900: 90, 110), Elizabeth conveys her frustration about her failed efforts to attain a good outcome when proceeding along what is supposed to be the path to enlightenment.

¹⁶ John McLeod mentions Dorothy Gale alongside Scarlett O'Hara, Tom Sawyer and other famous fictional adoptees, highlighting how "the prevalence of such figures across a range of cultural media indexes the long-standing fascination with and demand for adoption and concomitant stories" (2015: 230).

Not only Elizabeth, but also her husband Nate makes ample use of the popular children's story to define himself. The names of Nate (from Hebrew, *Nethanel*) and Dorothy (from Greek, a variant of *Dorothea*, which is a reversal of *Theodora*) mean exactly the same: "gift of God".¹⁷ However, the male protagonist of *Life Before Man* does not identify with Dorothy, but with her three companions. Nate combines the main features of the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion because he thinks that he lacks intelligence, love, and courage, whereas what he lacks in fact is self-confidence.

Nate recurrently casts himself as the Tin Woodman, described by Margaret Atwood in *Negotiating with the Dead* as someone "who claims to be missing a heart" and is "in search of personal life-enhancement and increased self-esteem" (2002: 112).¹⁸ Like the Tin Woodman, Nate is the son of a widow with whom he has maintained a close child/parent relationship well into adulthood, though this analogy is not overtly indicated in *Life Before Man*.¹⁹ In Atwood's novel, the first explicit allusion to the Tin Woodman comes up with the explanation of the reason why Nate does not want to wear the built-up heel he would need because his right leg is shorter than his left: "He refuses to join the ranks of the tin woodmen, those with false teeth, glass eyes, rubber breasts, orthopedic shoes. Not yet, not yet" (48).²⁰ Indeed, Nate finds himself confirmed in the role of the Tin Woodman when he considers not only his body, which "heats like metal" (312), but what he wrongly believes is a distinctive aspect of his personality: "What he suspects is the truth. That he's patchwork, a tin man, his heart stuffed with sawdust" (246). Later on, there is a third unequivocal allusion to the Tin Woodman when Nate expresses his fear that the worthy causes which make appeals to people's generosity will

¹⁷ Atwood plays with the idea that Nate (Nathanael) may or may not be a gift of God for his mother, his wife Elizabeth and his lover Lesje. The third-person narrator explains the meaning of Nathanael's name early in the novel, in one of the sections under the heading of Elizabeth: "Nathanael: Gift of God. His shameless mother takes care to point out this meaning" (1984: 50). The importance of this meaning is stressed again when the narrator observes in a scene involving Nathanael and Lesje within a section under the heading of the latter's name: "Is he about to cry? No. He's making a gift of himself, handing himself over to her, mutely" (1984: 116).

¹⁸ Atwood wrote in *Negotiating with the Dead*: "After many adventures she gets there, along with a Cowardly Lion who believes he lacks bravery, a Scarecrow who thinks he has no brain, and a Tin Woodman who claims to be missing a heart" (112).

¹⁹ When the Tin Woodman tells his story in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, he says: "When I grew up, I too became a woodchopper, and after my father died I took care of my old mother as long as she lived" (1900: 58).

²⁰ The Tin Woodman in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, was once an ordinary Woodman, a human being of flesh and bone, but after falling under the spell of the Wicked Witch of the East, he kept on chopping off parts of himself which were replaced one by one by a tinsmith until his whole body was made of tin (1900: 59-60).

“suck him dry, despite his sawdust heart” (314).²¹ Actually, Nate is far from being insensitive. He is full of tender sentiment, always reacts in a compassionate manner and shows caring emotions towards Elizabeth, his two daughters, his mother and his lover Lesje. In this sense Nate behaves as gently and kindly as the Tin Woodman, who “knew very well he had no heart, and therefore he took great care never to be cruel or unkind to anything” (1900: 72).

In line with the Scarecrow’s self-perception, Nate defines himself as a “feeble-minded creep” (35) and would like “Superman to take over his body” (35). Recalling another modern hero of the American film industry, Nate wishes to “walk like Spiderman up the wall” (72), but feels paralyzed by “cowardice, failure of nerve” (246), thus matching the apparent role of the Cowardly Lion. However, as is the case with the three comrades in the Land of Oz, readers suspect that Nate may already have within himself the qualities he is seeking. Nate makes some smart choices, just like the Scarecrow does at crucial moments (e.g. feeding apples to Dorothy when she is hungry and freeing her when she is held captive). He also performs some brave tasks, as the Cowardly Lion does (e.g. when fiercely confronting the Wicked Witch of the West). The characterization of Nate, a former lawyer turned into a wood toy maker and finally turned into a part-time lawyer again, represents Atwood’s first attempt to explore individual male subjectivity alongside female identity. The fact that she resorted to parodying *The Wizard of Oz* not only to depict some of her female characters, but also to portray a man engaged in a quest for life-enhancement because he feels dissatisfied with himself, is the best homage that Atwood as an accomplished writer could offer to the author who had haunted her imagination since she was a child.

Having made extensive use of *The Wizard of Oz* – including its gray Kansas setting – in order to illustrate the theme of home in *Life Before Man*, Atwood evoked the fairy tale again for a similar, albeit not identical, purpose in *The Blind Assassin* (2000). When Iris Chase, the protagonist of this novel, writes her memoir, she recalls how her nanny Reenie used to sing “Home, Sweet Home” and twice quotes from it a sentence which is repeated several times both in the song and in *The Wizard of Oz* MGM film, although it is only used once in Baum’s book: “There’s no place like home” (1900: 45).²² The elderly Iris records two different episodes which happened many years apart. First she gives an account of the one

²¹ In *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the Tin Woodman was finally given a heart stuffed with sawdust: “So Oz brought a pair of tinsmith’s shears and cut a small, square hole in the left side of the Tin Woodman’s breast. Then, going to a chest of drawers, he took out a pretty heart, made entirely of silk and stuffed with sawdust” (1900: 197).

²² The song, with lyrics written by John Howard Payne (1791-1852) for the operetta *Clari, or the Maid of Milan* (1823), was recorded by several singers, but Iris does not specify which version is sung by Reenie.

which took place later in time, when she was a middle-aged woman distressed by the failure of her marriage and the mysterious disappearance of her sister. Afterwards she reports the episode pertaining to her adolescence. She initially remembers a very sad meeting with Rennie at the end of which her former nanny sang "Home, Sweet Home". At this point the second line of the lyrics is cited in full, "Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home" (447), rather than the last line of each stanza, the more oft-quoted "There's no place like home, there's no place like home!". Rennie's casual singing is simply intended to encourage her daughter Myra to go home, since the three or four-year-old is reluctant to leave and must be promptly brought back to Dad, who is waiting. Although Rennie does not mean to hurt Iris, she causes her enormous pain, because the old song summons for her a mournful memory of her younger sister Laura, who is missing. Immediately after Rennie's departure, Iris feels abandoned and remembers Laura's odd reaction to their dear nanny's singing the same song many years earlier:

"There's no place like home," Laura said one day, when she was eleven or twelve.
 "Reenie sings that. I think it's stupid."
 "How do you mean?" I said.
 "Look." She wrote it out as an equation. *No place = home. Therefore, home = no place. Therefore home does not exist.* (447)

Laura, who suffered from "a mild form of autism" according to Atwood, had difficulty in understanding figurative meanings and tended to use language literally (Heilmann 2001: 141). Her interpretation of the phrase "There's no place like home" as a negation of the existence of home seems nonsensical, but it gains a sensible meaning if examined in the context of a novel where home – customarily understood as a site of comfort and security – actually does not exist. Home is no place. Home is nowhere. There is no place we can call home. By rejecting the conventional notion of home, Laura conveys a powerful insight into the sense of homelessness which pervades *The Blind Assassin*, a novel which actually contains a manifold critique of prevailing concepts of home.²³ As soon as Iris recollects this past episode, the proverb "Home is where the heart is" comes to her mind. Since she is undergoing a particularly difficult period of her life, in which she feels heartbroken and homeless, this idiom triggers a chain of thoughts about her current miserable condition:

I had no heart any more, it had been broken; or not broken, it simply wasn't there any more. It had been scooped neatly out of me like the yolk from a hard-boiled egg, leaving the rest of me bloodless and congealed and hollow.
 I'm heartless, I thought. Therefore I'm homeless. (447)

²³ Eleonora Rao contends that "*The Blind Assassin* destabilizes received notions of home, with their conventional meanings of comfort, security, and custom" (2006: 100).

In Baum's book, Dorothy had explained her desire to go back to her Kansas home in spite of all its drawbacks: "No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home" (1900: 45). She did not say it again in the book, but in the MGM film *Glinda the Good* repeats "There's no place like home" three times while she instructs Dorothy to repeat it also as the magic refrain which – together with the help of the ruby slippers – will allow her to quickly return home. Dorothy goes on repeating the phrase many times while she is waking up in her own bed – with the melody of "Home, Sweet Home" playing in the underscore – and says it again at the very end, so that these are the last words of the movie.²⁴

Apart from quoting the phrase "There's no place like home" in *The Blind Assassin* for the deconstruction and reversal of clichés about the meaning of home and homelessness, Atwood has also clarified her position about this issue on other occasions. For instance, in her review of *The Echo Maker* discussed above, she stated: "'There's no place like home' has taken on a modern, ominous meaning: there is, literally, no trustworthy home" (2006). Many years earlier she had expressed a resembling idea in her short story "A Travel Piece", whose narrator made the following comment: "Once, it seemed a long time ago, staying home meant safety, though tedium as well, [...]. Now it was the reverse, home was the dangerous place and people went on vacation to snatch a few weeks of uneventfulness" (1989a: 131). However, ironically citing the phrase "There's no place like home", as Atwood does in *The Blind Assassin* and in her review of a novel she compared with *The Wizard of Oz*, produces a much more striking effect. Salman Rushdie uses the same subversive device and achieves comparable results in the final paragraph of his response to *The Wizard of Oz*:

So Oz finally *becomes* home. The imagined world becomes the actual world, as it does for us all, because the truth is that, once we leave our childhood places and start to make up our lives, armed only with what we know and who we are, we come to understand that the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that "there's no place like home" but, rather, that there is no longer any such place *as* home – except, of course, for the homes we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz. Which is anywhere – and everywhere – except the place from which we began. (1992: 57)²⁵

²⁴ In the book, the phrase which Dorothy says while knocking the heels of the silver shoes together three times is: "Take me home to Aunt Em!" (1900: 258). Her final words are: "And oh, Aunt Em! I'm so glad to be at home again!" (1900: 260).

²⁵ Rushdie's commentary about displacement involves issues of exile and nationality, a dimension also treated by Atwood on other occasions. For instance, the protagonist of her novel *Cat's Eye* –

4. CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood gives ample evidence of the adaptability of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) and the 1939 film based on it. Throughout her literary and social criticism not only does she resort to evoking the textual and cinematic versions of the story in order to illustrate her views on a wide range of topics (including issues of gendered power relationships, the links between illusion and reality, as well as the role of the artist as a magician) but she even successfully transposes the allegory of the tale to present-day political debates. Her interpretation of two novels (*The Witches of Eastwick* and *The Echo Maker*) as possible – though perhaps unintended – rewritings of the fairy tale and the numerous hints she provides about her own borrowings can be understood as an invitation to explore her fictional writings in search of intertextual connections. The results are fruitful. The literary debt owed by Atwood to *The Wizard of Oz* regarding *Life Before Man* extends to details of setting, theme, characterization and imagery, all of which the novelist adapts selectively with a subversive, parodic twist. Though the impact of *The Wizard of Oz* on *The Blind Assassin* seems to be restricted to two short episodes designed to challenge traditionally idealized representations of home, they prove once again Atwood's ability as a satirist of our contemporary culture, as an exceptional creative writer working "at the intersection of art with power, and therefore with moral and social responsibility" (Atwood 2002: 111).

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prompted by the sight of a female stranger who is probably a war refugee asking for help – reflects: "homelessness is a nationality now" (1989b: 314).

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