

**Existential Outsideness within the Concept of Place in Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye**

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**ABSTRACT**

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* has always been analysed through the feminist point of view (McCombs, 1991; Beyer, 1996) but not much has emerged in studies that explore explicitly how existential outsideness is represented in the novel. Prior to that, this paper seeks to examine the relationship between human and place as proposed by Edward Relph (1976) in the novel *Cat's Eye* by a Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood (b.1939). The novel depicts vividly the protagonist's account of a prolonged disengagement and alienation in life that started in early childhood continuing to an adult life as a painter. Subsequently, place in particular, has become the main conceptual framework in exploring the ideas of the relationships between humans and physical environments. As such, the element of existential outsideness under the concept of place by Relph (1976) has become an important element in this study where emphasis is put on the landscape as the fundamental idea. This element will further be used in this textual analysis as a methodology, namely the concept of existential outsideness within the concept of place under ecocriticism in analysing *Cat's Eye* by Atwood. The objective of this study then is to explore the concept of existential outsideness as connected to the protagonist's emotions and her psychological states. The findings will finally demonstrate the correlation between the element of existential outsideness with the protagonist's disengagement and alienation which subsequently acts as a mirror of the protagonist's emotions and psychological states.

*Keywords:* Information Literacy, Higher Education, Interactive Multimedia, Learning Objectives

**Introduction**

The idea of connecting ideas, both geography and literary traditions could be seen as a cross-disciplinary attempt which connotes the idea of the relationships between humans and place (Cecil and Cecil, 2007). Relph's idea of promoting the concept of existential outsideness, is used to explore the mental state or characters' progressions by examining the characters' acceptance towards places and how such representations could deploy strong emotional states which could create meanings from the strong relationships of humans and place. On one hand, *Cat's Eye* (1988) which tells a chronological life story of a painter could be seen as seemingly fit into the concerns of the distinctive geographical locations and rich representations of landscapes that are worth to be analysed. In the previous studies, there have not been many literary studies on the concept existential outsideness under Ecocriticism in Atwood's *Cat's Eye* except for Feminism and Postcolonialism. As such, this paper hopes to fill in the gap on the study of existential outsideness in *Cat's Eye* by Atwood. Prior to that, instead of examining *Cat's Eye* (1988) from a feminist point of view, this paper will analyse this novel from an Ecocriticism point of view where the concept of existential outsideness will be the main conceptual framework in analysing the novel.

### Objectives

The objectives of this paper are as follows:

1. To examine how place is depicted in the novel.
2. To explore the correlation between the element of existential outsidership with the protagonist's emotions and psychological states.

### Research Questions

This paper will hopefully help to answer the research questions below:

1. How is place depicted in the novel?
2. How is the element of existential outsidership connected to the protagonist's emotions and psychological states?

### Contribution of the paper

Our paper could help to create awareness on the significance of places and landscapes in literary texts and help to prove that settings or landscapes have their own diversity that not only serves to beautify certain fictions or literary texts but also could help the readers to realize the importance of landscape. This study subsequently suggests that people should regard places in a more empathetic way so that the relationships between humans and place could be rebuilt and could create meanings. The study of place here has helped to distinguish the importance of settings or landscapes in literary studies and how it could foreground the relationships between humans and nature or places. Thus, this study will also hopefully open up further discussion to the study on place by adding or giving new interpretations to the significance of place in future research on *Cat's Eye*.

### Theory

According to Relph (1976), there are seven modes of insidership and outsidership grounded in different levels of experiential involvements where each one deploys its own meaning (Relph 1976, 50). For instance, the higher level of outsidership deals with a feeling of deep strangeness or alienation such as a feeling experienced by newcomers or someone who is away from his birthplace then returns to find out that the place is no longer the same as it used to be (Seamon & Sowers 2008, 44). From all of the seven modes of experiential involvements, existential outsidership is chosen due to its profound and high level of detachment which is not found in other six levels of experiential involvements. As such, due to its suitability, the aforementioned theory is seen as strongly applicable to analyze the uninvolved state experienced by the main protagonist in the novel.

### Methodology

This paper will be purely based on a textual analysis as the methodology, namely the element of existential outsidership within the concept of place under Ecocriticism. Thus, all the possible data are gathered from reliable sources, such as journals from library databases, books, articles and any secondary methods that we could rely upon in completing this paper. The novel *Cat's Eye* (1988) by Margaret Atwood is used as the main data for this paper. A close reading of the text and all the related sources regarding the conceptual framework of Ecocriticism will be used intensively in realising this paper. The study by Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (1976), will serve as the backbone or the main reference pertaining to the main conceptual framework for this paper.

### Literature Review

There have been many studies conducted on *Cat's Eye* (1988) by Atwood and the novel has proven to be among the best seller books by Atwood. It was the finalist for the 1988 Governor General's Award and the 1989 Booker Prize. One of the most discussed themes in studies on *Cat's Eye* is from the feminist perspective. McCombs (1991) and Beyer (1996) analyse *Cat's Eye* from a feminist point of view and they both agree that *Cat's Eye* has a strong representation of female characters searching for identity and a sense of belonging. Beyer further explains that the notion of place is important to show or illuminate the self or feminine identity. In this study, Beyer puts emphasis on Atwood's attempt to challenge feminist issues by putting women in a current state interrelated with contemporary issues:

“Atwood's fictions explore feminine difference as an excess term that challenges notions and representations of women in popular culture, and use images of place to situate her characters in contexts which afford alternative strategies for thinking about self and gender.” (Beyer 1996, 6)

In contrast to Beyer's statement, McCombs' (1991) earlier opinion is slightly different as she focuses more on *Cat's Eye's* strong notion of femininity. She states that, “*Cat's Eye* represents – whether Atwood's contrary seer narrator admits it or not – what a feminist perspective can recognise as profoundly woman-centred and feminist-oriented remembering and visions” (9). This statement is also supported by Davies (2006) who discusses Atwood's female bodies in most of her fictions including in *Cat's Eye*. In this study, Davies specifically discusses the representations of female bodies in Elaine's shape-shifting in *Cat's Eye* by using Helene Cixous's theory of female bodies in feminist criticism. Davies states:

“Cixous's vision of female inscription is usefully intersected with Atwood's writing practice and that analysis of Atwood's body of writing must pay close attention to her writing of the body where the fight for autonomy and articulation is figuratively written in permanent ink.” (Davies 2006, 69-70)

In parallel to the feminist views by Davies, Cooke (2004) earlier discusses the same theme in *Cat's Eye* but is more focused on the period or setting of the novel during the 1940s and 1950s where women lived in a world of heterosexual middle-class and needed to gain their voices and identities from their male counterparts (Cooke 2004, 109). On one hand, *Cat's Eye* has also been analysed using the themes of Postcolonial theory as conducted in studies by Beyer (2005) and Rao (2006). Beyer (2005), for instance, agrees that the narrator in *Cat's Eye* experiences a state of marginalization and has self-conflict as a Canadian. The depictions of place and landscape, according to Beyer, serve as symbolic sites for dealing upon the constructions of self and national identities. This view is supported by Rao (2006) who also states that the theme of post-colonialism in *Cat's Eye* discusses the sense of nationality and how it is depicted together with the protagonist Elaine who feels a lack of self-identity and sense of belonging. Elaine, who is a Canadian, cannot feel that she belongs to Canada and she is deeply affected by characters, such as Mr Banerj and Mrs Feinstein, who are immigrants in her country. Rao concludes that the novel advocates the “conventional ordering of an imperial center and subsidiary margin” (Rao 2006, 102). To be precise, the concept of place described in studies on *Cat's Eye* is more focused on the concept of place in Postcolonialism and none, so far, has been conducted on the concept of place under the field of Ecocriticism.

### Findings

There are six elements of existential outsidership which we found corresponding to the spatial experiences of the protagonist in this analysis. The first element which invokes “a sense of unreality of the world, and of not belonging” (Relph 1976, 51) is reflected in many events in the novel especially during her first arrival at the city of Toronto. The second element invokes the “feeling of alienation from people and place” (Relph 1976, 65). As a displaced person in her own territory, the protagonist sees herself as an outsider who could not situate herself well with the people and place. The third element proposed by Relph (1976) is “a self-conscious and reflective uninvolvedness.”(Relph 1976, 51).

This is the moment in which the protagonist is portrayed as being unable to reach the level of being a true insider in her hometown which creates a border towards her communal space. That condition could be seen as enhancing the element of a reflective uninvolvedness to the place. The next element that we found in this study is the element of ‘homelessness’ that is best applied to the protagonist’s life who is seen as never being able to feel that she really belongs to a place in which she could regard as home. Next, the element of existential outsidership could also be understood as when “all places assume the same meaningless identity and the place are distinguishable only by their superficial qualities” (Relph 1976, 51). The protagonist who is portrayed as having lost connection to her particular setting is seen as being able only to remember it through the representation of its evident landscapes. The last element of existential outsidership that we have found in the analysis based on Relph’s element of existential outsidership is the feeling of “people who, having been away from their birthplace/hometown, return to feel strangers because the place is no longer what it was when they knew it earlier.”(Seamon&Sowers 2008, 44) This element explains explicitly the exact exclusion and alienation elements that are confronted by the protagonist through this whole analysis.

Relph’s highest mode of spatial experiences comprising existential outsidership is found to be the best tool in describing the exact emotions and psychological states based on analysis of Elaine’s personal views and dilemma towards her related place. From the analysis, we have found that existential outsidership connotes the characteristic of having a dual or split personality and our finding shows that Elaine imitates the girls in her hometown as she is not able to be herself as a result of being displaced and losing connection with her landscape. In the novel, Elaine is portrayed as quiet, inactive, less sociable and experiencing difficulty to mingle with the society. As a result, our findings have clearly shown strong depiction of existential outsidership, which has influenced Elaine in terms of losing her sense of identity, and belonging or even having lost both of them.

Apart from that, the setting of place could serve as a profound indicator of Elaine’s disengagement and alienation. To be precise, the distinction between existential outsidership with the protagonist’s state of emotions depends on the level of intensity or how she experiences the notions (Relph 1976, 50). Carr (2002), for instance, proposes that the notion of ‘place attachment’ could only be achieved by experiences and profound intentions filled with meanings and emotions (Carr 2002, 46). In Toronto, Elaine is portrayed as experiencing massive alienation from people around her and she could not situate herself well with a new urban environment; a situation which has been highlighted by Carr (2002). The setting of Toronto is specifically chosen to elucidate the feeling of existential outsidership that she has to confront back in the city. Therefore, we can safely suggest that the protagonist has lost her sense of place attachment due to the low level of intensity which leads to lack of meanings and emotions. As such, it is important to note that, there is a strong correlation between the element of existential outsidership with the

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protagonist's disengagement and alienation which subsequently acts as a mirror of Elaine's emotional and psychological states.

### Discussion

As stated by Relph (1976), existential outsidership is "a sense of unreality of the world, and of not belonging" (Relph 1976, 51). In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine travels from Vancouver to Toronto in order to attend her retrospective exhibition. At that point, she starts to remember the journeys that belong to her adolescence, from the wilderness to the city. The journey projects the protagonist's gradual spatial experiences from the moment of happiness, security, freedom and peace to a sense of sadness, loss, pain and loneliness. The abrupt changes that befall Elaine actually strengthen the notion of existential outsidership which transforms her into a displaced person. The extracts below can be seen as corresponding to the elements of existential outsidership as defined by Relph (1967), in which the protagonist "feels alienated from people and place" (Atwood 1988, 65):

"In my dreams of the city I am always lost." (Atwood 1988, 13)

"The fact is that I hate this city. I've hated it so long I can hardly remember feeling any other way about it." (Atwood 1988, 13)

"It's the city I need to leave as much as Jon, I think. It's the city that's killing me." (Atwood 1988, 441)

The extracts above clearly reflect the element of existential outsidership, namely the feeling of being displaced and alienated as well as a loss of the sense of belonging.

The first example corresponds to a view by Rao (2007) who suggests that "the protagonist in *Cat's Eye* (1988) regards Toronto as an alien place, in which she feels like a foreigner, where she felt and still feels out of place, isolated and excluded as if she were a member of a different culture of race." (Rao 2007, 103) Although Rao (2007) explores the concepts of 'home' and 'displacement' from a postcolonial perspective, it is important to note that the concepts used by her is seen as equivalent to the elements of existential outsidership discussed in this analysis. Based on Relph's point of view, it can be suggested that Elaine is experiencing a crisis with her own surrounding and she feels alienated from the people and the place. As seen in the above extracts, it accumulates all the same feelings of being out of place. The protagonist is seen as totally disengaged and has lost total connections with that particular place.

Another element of existential outsidership is when a person has "a self-conscious and reflective uninvolvedness" (Relph 1976, 51). The extracts above also show clearly that the protagonist realises and considers the fact that the city, Toronto, is not for her and she does not belong there. In addition, the feeling of being an outsider emerges from the first moment she steps her foot in that particular city. As recalled, in the novel, Elaine is portrayed as coming from a life in the wilderness and living a nomadic life. The representation of that background has built a distinctive perception among others which refers to her as an alien and a displaced person. Hence, that particular mindset has created a border towards her communal space and she is portrayed as being unable to reach the level of being a true insider in that area. The condition of being alienated and unaccepted is another reason or cause why she could not engage herself well with that particular setting and therefore leads her to a loss of the sense of belonging and identity.

Another element for existential outsidership proposed by Relph (1976) is the notion of 'homelessness'. Homelessness can be described as a feeling of being insecure and not being safe and free in their own space. The feeling of homelessness is best depicted during Elaine's adulthood and this is demonstrated in the following extracts:

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“When I wake up it’s the middle of the night. I don’t know where I am. I think I’m back in my old room with the cloudy light fixture, in my parents’ house, lying on the floor because I’ve fallen out of bed, as I used to do when we had the army cots. But I know that the house has been sold, that my parents are no longer there. I have somehow been overlooked, left behind.” (Atwood 1988, 394)

“Home, I think. But it’s nowhere I can go back to.” (Atwood 1988, 443)

In the novel, the notion of homelessness is more noticeable during Elaine’s adulthood. In Toronto, from childhood to adult years, Elaine faces an “exceeding impact of the unreality of world and of not belonging” (Relph 1976, 51) as proposed by Relph (1976) in the earlier discussion. During her first arrival to Toronto, Elaine is portrayed as still engaged in and adapting herself to a new surroundings. She tries to regard her new house as her home and tries to create her own feeling of being at home. However, the series of unfortunate events that befall her have dampened her spirit and, as time passes by, she tries to move out from her hometown when she gets a chance to do so.

In the first extract, she is portrayed living in an apartment in the city of Toronto quite far from her parents’ house. At that moment, her parents have migrated to the North and their previous house has been sold. As such, the particular condition adds up to her own personal problem which in turn has created a feeling of homelessness where she feels that she has no place to stay and she has no backbone to rely on. This situation is also similar to the second extract which refers to her sense of longing for her childhood landscapes. At that point, she leaves Toronto and moves to Vancouver in order to forget about her personal problems. However, Vancouver can only be seen as a temporary solution for her to forget her problems but not as a place that could give her a sense of security and to feel at home as she feels during her childhood.

Thus, existential outsidership can also be understood as “all places assume the same meaningless identity and the place are distinguishable only by their superficial qualities” (Relph 1976, 51). As someone who has lost connection to her particular setting, Elaine presumes Toronto to be a place that is meaningless and she could only remember it by the representation of its evident landscapes. There are two extracts from the novel which describe Toronto as possessing a meaningless identity as can be seen below:

“In my dreams of this city I am always lost.” (Atwood 1988, 14)

“I’ve forgotten things, I’ve forgotten that I’ve forgotten them.” (Atwood 1988, 237)

The extracts above demonstrate how Elaine has lost her sense of belonging in Toronto. The only solution that she can think of at that time is to escape and to be far away from her hometown. She seems to suffer from a lack of attachment to her backgrounds and she feels that Toronto does not provide a meaningful identity. As can be seen in the previous analysis and in the first extract, in her dream of Toronto, she feels lost and out of place. The notion of existential outsidership could be seen as rather strong here because Elaine has created a living-division towards her background and a vast boundary between her and that particular landscape. In addition, Elaine is portrayed as forgetting easily the changes that befall her although they had just occurred in the past few years. These elements actually strengthen the existential outsidership in which she feels that her hometown has no specific meaning to her. This is actually related to all of her bad experiences that she had confronted back in that city.

The next element which can be seen in the novel is how a place can be noticeable only through the depictions of evident landscapes. It is important to note that Elaine has forgotten all of her memories during childhood because they bring a lot of painful

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memories to her. As such, her memories towards her hometown can be seen as really scarce and can only be distinguished by her distinct memory towards the uniqueness of the setting. The depiction of the apparent landscapes can be seen below:

“Outside, the skyline has changed: the Park Plaza is no longer the tallest building around, but a squat leftover, dwarfed by the svelte glassy towers that rise around it. Due south is the CN Tower, lifting up like a huge inverted icicle. This is the sort of architecture you used to see only in science-fiction comic books, and seeing it pasted flat against the monotone lake-sky I feel I’ve stepped not forward in time but sideways, into a universe of two dimensions.” (Atwood 1988, 431)

The extract above shows lucidly the images and representations of distinctive landscapes which have caught the protagonist’s attention. In the novel, even though Elaine can be seen as having difficulties in remembering her past, she still can remember vividly the exact representations of her landscape. She is portrayed as still possessing good memory in recalling the designs and architectures of certain buildings in her hometown. As such, the lack of emotional attachment has reduced the notion of a sense of place between Elaine and her hometown. Prior to that, she observes the background just like an outsider who discovers a place by its uniqueness and not by heart and its people. This textual evidence then corresponds to Relph’s element of existential outsidership where “the places are distinguishable only by their superficial qualities” (Relph 1976, 51).

The next element of existential outsidership is “the feeling of people who, having been away from their birthplace/hometown, return to feel strangers because the place is no longer what it was when they knew it earlier” (Seamon & Sowers 2008, 44). This view is supported by Howells (2005) who suggests that *Cat’s Eye* features a women painter brought up in Toronto in the 1950s and 1960s who returns 30 years later as a minor celebrity, only to find the place defamiliarised by time” (Howells 2005, 45). Based on Howells’ point of view, it is important to assert that Elaine only returns to her hometown in order to attend her retrospective exhibition and she is portrayed as not looking forward to her homecoming because of the strong feeling of an outsider where she feels that she does not belong to that place. This finding corresponds to a view by Rao (2007) who suggests that “the protagonist wanders through the streets like a transient, nomad and totally a stranger” (Rao 2007, 103). This then explains explicitly the exact exclusion and alienation elements that are confronted by the protagonist during her journey back to her hometown. The depictions of those circumstances can be seen in the extract below:

“But the school has disappeared. In its place a new school has risen instantly, like a mirage: light-coloured, block shaped, glossy and modern. I feel hit, in the pit of the stomach. The old school has been erased, wiped from space. It’s as if it was never there at all. I lean against a telephone pole, bewildered, as if something has been cut out of my brain. Suddenly I’m bone tired. I would like to go to sleep.” (Atwood 1988, 470)

We can see from the extract above that the protagonist feels totally alarmed with the abrupt changes in her hometown, Toronto. Within seconds, Elaine immediately loses emotional and spiritual connections to the place and could only regard herself as a visitor or an outsider who has come to that place only to observe and witness the changes and the superficial qualities that belong to that place. The depiction of that particular emotion has strengthened the notion of existential outsidership in which the protagonist is clouded with the feelings of loneliness and out of place. The element of an outsider reflected by the protagonist confirms the notion of existential outsidership that only refers to someone who feels totally disconnected towards their hometown. As such, we suggest her spatial

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experiences in Toronto or her hometown can be classified as fulfilling the notion of existential outsidership which separates the protagonist from her landscape.

### Limitations

This paper will be only using one novel which is *Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood. This paper focus solely on the concept of place, specifically on existential outsidership, and to examine how place is depicted in the novel. *Cat's Eye* deploys distinctive geographical locations and rich representations of landscapes worth analysing. For instance, Atwood writes vividly about Canadian cities and its small towns, and also about Canadian wilderness through the depictions of forests, lakes, cabins and bushes very much engaging to readers. In this paper, we focus specifically on the concept of place connected to the characters' emotions and their psychological states. Other than that, this paper also focuses on the element of existential outsidership faced by the characters that will help us understand the dilemma or correlated circumstances experienced by the characters in her attempt to seek for her sense of identity and sense of belonging.

### Recommendations

We hope that this paper will provide more insights for research on *Cat's Eye* pertaining to the concept of existential outsidership within the concept of place. We believe that *Cat's Eye* and also other novels written by Atwood have great potential to be analysed using the concept of place because of their distinctive themes, characters and settings. As stated by Cecil and Cecil (2007), "place has been a consistent undercurrent in the development of Atwood's female characters" (Cecil 2007, 239). This view has been highlighted earlier by Cooke (2004) who states that "Atwood researches the settings of her novels very carefully, checking that particular items in the landscape were really there at the time in which her novels are set" (Cooke 2004, 22).

There are several novels of Atwood that we would like to suggest for its suitability with the study of place. Novels, such as *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000), can be seen as totally compatible for future research on the concept of place. The other novels from other writers that we would like to suggest are *A Map of Glass* (2005) and *Sanctuary Line* (2010) by Jane Urquhart which contain rich depictions of places that could also be seen as totally useful for this kind of research. From these two recommendations, we suggest that these novels can be extremely applicable in the study of existential outsidership within the concept of place under Ecocriticism. As the study of places in the literary sphere could be seen as rather scarce, we really hope that this paper could add more significant values to the number of studies regarding the concept of existential outsidership under the field of Ecocriticism.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, *Cat's Eye* has proven to be a useful text to analyse by using the concept of place pertaining to the element of existential outsidership as a conceptual framework as there are various depictions or representations of places by Atwood in the novel. Furthermore, the element of existential outsidership as proposed by Relph (1976) has been extremely applicable in this study. Rather than exploring the concept of place as an inanimate object or mere exterior background that is soundless or unsung, Relph's study on place could be seen as a study that is worth reviewing and could provide a full understanding of how place should be given extra credit and how it should be explored in a different manner. This is seemingly connected to Atwood's writing technique where she gives focus and attention on the places and settings in most of her novels, including the

novel that we have used for analysis in this study. The depictions of places can be seen as realistic, accurate and useful for this study and they, in turn, put strong focus on the life and the spatial experiences of the protagonist.

Moreover, our study has demonstrated that the concept of place as proposed by Relph has helped us to reveal and further understand the depictions of places which we believe have been overlooked by other researchers. Thus, the conceptual framework used here could also be seen as applicable in order to examine the strong relationship between humans and places as depicted by Atwood. Our paper has also found that the pertaining concept is extremely useful to discover the emotions or psychological states of the protagonist which can be found from the author's depictions of humans and places or the spatial experiences.

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