

## Theme of Identity Crisis in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*

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**Abstract:** Margaret Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle* is an exploration of the theme of identity and how it shapes the protagonist's life. The novel is about Joan Foster, a successful author who is struggling with her identity and her perception of self. The theme of identity is present throughout the novel, particularly in the protagonist's search for self-discovery and self-acceptance. One of the most significant themes in *Lady Oracle* is the idea that identity is not fixed; instead, it is fluid and constantly evolving. Joan's search for self-discovery and self-acceptance shows that identity is not only shaped by our past experiences, but also by our present actions and choices. This is evident in the different identities Joan creates for herself in the novel, each of which reflects a different aspect of her personality. Another theme related to identity in the novel is the idea of performance. Joan's multiple identities are, in a sense, performances that she puts on for different audiences. Whether it is as a successful author, a romantic novelist, or a fat woman trying to find acceptance, Joan is always performing for others. However, as the novel progresses, she begins to realize that she cannot continue to perform for others without sacrificing her true identity. The novel shows that the key to discovering one's true identity is through self-awareness and acceptance of one's past and experiences. Ultimately, the novel teaches us that true identity lies not in the masks we wear or the roles we play, but in our ability to embrace who we are and live authentically.

**Key Words:** Identity Crisis, Search for Self, Self- Acceptance, Multiple Identities.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* is a novel that explores the theme of identity crisis through the eyes of the novel's protagonist, Joan Foster. The novel revolves around Joan's attempts to reconcile with her past, come to terms with her true identity, and break free from the multiple masks she wears. This paper examines the importance of identity crisis as portrayed in *Lady Oracle*. Joan's identity struggle is a central theme in the novel. It is a powerful exploration of identity crisis, self-discovery, and the importance of acceptance. Joan's multiple identities are a metaphor for the many masks that we wear in everyday life. The novel shows that the key to discovering one's true identity is through self-awareness and acceptance of one's past and experiences. Ultimately, the novel teaches us that true identity lies not in the masks we wear or the roles we play, but in our ability to embrace who we are and live authentically.

### 2. SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL:

In the opening scene, she is seen faking her own death, which suggests that she is trying to escape from her past and create a new identity for herself. However, as the novel progresses, she realizes that she cannot escape her identity, and must confront and accept it to move forward in life. Joan's attempt to shed her layers of identities and reveal her true self is a powerful metaphor for the importance of self-discovery and acceptance. Joan's multiple identities are created to escape a reality that she finds difficult to accept. The novel suggests that identity crisis is not merely an existential problem, but is often driven by emotional and psychological traumas. Joan's trauma is largely due to the abuse she experienced from her mother and the death of her father. These incidents have left scars in Joan's psyche, and she seeks to create different identities to retreat from the pain of her past. As she grapples with these traumas, she realizes that the key to finding her true identity is to confront her past and resolve her traumas. Throughout the novel, Joan's identity crisis is also used to explore themes of gender and social norms. Joan is a woman who has been conditioned by societal expectations of femininity and womanhood. The novel shows how Joan struggles to fit into these boxes, and how her search for identity is, in part, a rebellion against these norms. For instance, the romance novels that Joan writes are seen as a way for her to escape from the gender roles society has set for her. However, as she breaks free from these expectations and finds her true identity, she also begins to challenge social norms and expectations. Joan's search for who she truly is also important as it highlights the power of self-awareness and acceptance.

### **3. SEARCH FOR IDENTITY:**

*Lady Oracle* is a psychological novel that delves into the theme of self-discovery and the search for identity. The protagonist, Joan Foster, is a complex character who struggles with multiple identities and an unresolved past. In this paper, I will explore how Joan's journey to find herself leads to the discovery of her true identity and the resolution of past trauma. Joan Foster is a woman who has created multiple identities to escape the pain and disappointment of her life. As a child, she used a "secret name," "Louisa K. Delacourt," to pretend that she was the heroine of the novels she read. She later wrote romance novels under a pseudonym, Jacqueline, to escape her fears and to gain financial independence. However, her different personas only serve to amplify her insecurities and anxiety, leaving her feeling unfulfilled and lost. Joan's journey of self-discovery begins with her weight loss journey. During this time, she realizes that she has been hiding under "fat-suits" and false identities. Her transformation becomes a metaphor for her search for her real self. Through the weight-loss clinic, Joan meets other women who also seek to change themselves. These women become a source of support and help Joan to face her problems with honesty. As Joan embarks on her journey, she begins to face her past traumas, including the death of her father and her mother's abuse. Joan travels to Italy, where she had experienced a traumatic event years earlier. The trip allows her to confront her past and to integrate it into her self-concept. The discovery of her true identity is also apparent in her decision to write a memoir instead of writing romance novels. Joan recognizes that writing the truth is important to her, and through that honesty, she discovers her authentic voice. Through her relationships with men, Joan confronts different experiences and challenges that test her ability to discover her true self. She first falls in love with a poet, Paul, who represents her past and her romantic dreams. Joan realizes that she cannot build a life with him because he is a fantasy and a reflection of her "Jacqueline" identity. She then marries Arthur, an older man, for stability and security, but finds love for him after she confronts and begins to accept her trauma. Finally, her relationship with Royal Porcupine is the catalyst for her discovery of her true identity. Royal Porcupine is an artist who accepts Joan for who she is, challenging her to be candid and vulnerable. She eventually learns that the search for identity is an ongoing process that requires honesty, vulnerability, and self-acceptance. Joan's relationships and her trip to Italy are significant elements of her journey of self-discovery. Her memoir represents her honesty, and her ability to write about her life shows her acceptance and integration of herself. Through her transformation, Joan discovers her true identity, and the novel presents this transformation as a journey of healing and growth.

### **4. JOURNEY OF SELF- DISCOVERY:**

Margaret Atwood tells the story of Joan Foster, a Canadian author who struggles with her identity and past traumas while searching for self-discovery. Throughout the novel, the theme of the journey of self-discovery is explored as Joan embarks on a journey to reconcile with her past, confront her fears, and find her true self. At the beginning of the novel, Joan leads a double life, hiding her true identity from her friends and family. She creates different personas and writes romantic novels under a pen name, Jacqueline, which is a clear indicator of her internal battles with her identity. Through her writing, Joan explores different aspects of herself without fear of judgment, but soon realizes that her fictional stories are a reflection of her personal experiences. Joan's journey of self-discovery begins when she attends a weight loss clinic, which is a turning point in her life. As she begins to lose weight, Joan becomes more confident and decides to confront her past. She travels to Italy, a place where she previously lived and where she experienced a traumatic event that haunts her until now. In Italy, Joan recalls memories from her past that she had suppressed, such as her father's death, her abusive mother, and her first love. Through her trip to Italy, Joan's journey of self-discovery intensifies, and she starts to explore her true self. She revisits her past, faces her fears, and confronts her insecurities. She also realizes that her romantic novels are not true representations of herself and decides to write a memoir about her life instead. She embraces the idea of honesty and vulnerability, which is a fundamental element of her journey of self-discovery. As the story progresses, Joan's journey of self-discovery is revealed through her relationships with different men. The first is Paul, a poet whom she loves but realizes he is not right for her. Then there is Arthur, her older husband whom she marries for financial stability but whom she later loves after she confronts her past traumas. Finally, there is Royal Porcupine, a new muse who finally helps Joan find closure, self-acceptance, and love in her life. The novel highlights how facing one's fears, embracing honesty, and vulnerability lead to greater self-awareness and personal growth. Through Joan's journey, readers can relate to the idea that self-discovery is an ongoing process of learning and growing.

### **5. SUPPRESSED IDENTITY:**

Joan Foster struggles with the issue of suppressed identity. Throughout the novel, Joan tries to bury her true identity under various personas and personas that disguise her past. She feels the need to suppress her identity due to the trauma she has faced, and the societal pressures she faces. The novel delves into the theme of suppressed identity and explores how it affects the protagonist's life, relationships and self-acceptance. As a child, Joan's mother instilled a sense of

shame in her about her weight and appearance. This, along with her mother's constant criticism, has led Joan to suppress her true identity and put on a façade in front of others. For years, she hides behind a veil of normality, concealing her real self and past from even those closest to her. Joan creates an alternate self as a writer, concealing her identity and past for the sake of success. As the novel progresses, we see Joan's relationships with different men affected by her inability to accept her true identity. In her marriage to Arthur Mahoney, she spends years projecting an image of herself that differs from reality, creating an illusion of a courageous, adventurous woman. This leads to Arthur being unaware of the troubles she has had in the past, which ultimately results in the breakdown of their relationship. Furthermore, Joan's relationship with Royal Porcupine also suffers due to her suppressed identity. She feels trapped in her relationship with Porcupine, an eccentric millionaire who is controlling, possessive and paranoid. Unable to be her true self around Porcupine leads to her inability to form a healthy connection with him, and she uses deception to create alternate versions of herself. Joan's suppressed identity ultimately affects her self-acceptance. She is unable to confront her past, and this leads to her being unable to accept herself as she is. She continues to suppress her emotions and identity until she finally confronts the truth in the novel's final act. By facing her past, Joan can finally come to terms with her emotions and accept herself for who she is. The novel highlights the consequences of suppressing one's identity, as it can affect an individual's relationships, self-acceptance and personal growth. It exemplifies the importance of self-acceptance and the power of facing one's true identity. Through Joan's journey, we see that acceptance and facing one's past are the first steps to one's growth and self-discovery.

## **6. MULTIPLE IDENTITY:**

*Lady Oracle* is a complex novel that centres around the theme of multiple identities. The protagonist, Joan Foster, is constantly creating alternate selves, struggling with her past, and navigating her present. The novel highlights the fluidity of identity, the different roles that people play, and the ways in which identity can be constructed and reconstructed. Joan is a master of constructing alternate identities for herself, and throughout the novel, she creates multiple personas, each one representing a different aspect of her personality. She first creates "Louisa K. Delacourt," the author of cheap Gothic novels that appeals to her romantic imagination. She writes these novels under the guise of Delacourt, successfully marketing herself to a wide audience, marking a shift in her career. However, Joan's multiple identities are not just limited to her writing career. In her personal life, she assumes different personas depending on the situation. She feels like a victim in her mother's eyes, so she creates an image of herself that is far removed from their shared past. She then proceeds to date Arthur, a man she met in Italy, who knows her as "Mrs Mahoney." It is later revealed that she had been using a different name and a different persona to lead a double life, which complicates her life further. Joan's relationships also demonstrate the versatility of identity, as she changes her persona to suit different men. For instance, with her ex-husband Arthur Mahoney, she is a confident woman seen as strong, courageous and free-spirited. In contrast, with her lover Royal Porcupine, she is timid, apologetic, and highly dependent on him. Furthermore, Joan's multiple identities enable her to escape from her past and reinvent herself. As a young girl, she suffered from body-image issues and had a highly critical mother, but as an adult, she becomes a fashion model and uses another identity to reconstruct her self-image. She takes on jobs, marries men, and creates alternate selves to convince herself that she is productive and, in turn, makes her identity a productive part of her life. However, Joan's multiple identities are not always a conscious choice. In following the expectations of her life, Joan sometimes unconsciously constructs numerous identities. She is unsure of who she is or who's she's meant to be, leading to an ongoing struggle to determine her true identity. Her past has a hold on her, influencing her thoughts and actions, leaving her uncertain of her true self. Joan's numerous identities throughout the novel suit different situations and people, allowing her to confront different aspects of herself. It is an exemplar of the struggle people face in creating and maintaining an identity and understanding the complexity of the self. *Lady Oracle* invites readers to understand the ambiguities and possibilities in the construction of one's identity as determinedly shaped by the self-conscious development and constructed management of varied identities.

## **7. STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY:**

The novel is a literary masterpiece that tackles the theme of the struggle for identity. The novel portrays the experiences of Joan, a young woman, who is forced to confront her identity as she tries to navigate life. The novel illustrates that the struggle for identity is not an easy journey, as Joan finds herself constantly grappling with her identity, creating alternate selves, and trying to reconcile her past with her present. Joan's struggle for identity begins with her desire to escape her past, to create a new identity, and to be someone else. She is haunted by the memory of her mother, who is constantly present in her dreams and inner struggle. Joan's obsession with her past drives her to create a series of alternate selves, such as Louisa K. Delacourt, the author of cheap Gothic novels. Through her alternate selves, Joan seeks to escape her past and become a new person that is free from the burden of her past. However, Joan's alternate selves do not offer the

perfect solution as her past continues to haunt her. Joan is forced to confront her past as she returns to her hometown and is confronted with her family's secrets. Her trip back home is an opportunity for her to understand her past better and to find a way to reconcile it with her present. Through understanding her past and coming to terms with it, Joan is better equipped to construct a new identity for herself that is grounded in her true self. Joan's struggle for identity is also shown through her relationships with men. Her relationships show her desire to have someone validate her identity, and confirm that she is lovable and valuable. She engages in sexual relationships with different men, including Arthur, a man who deems her worthy of love and acceptance. Her relationships with men show that Joan is trying to find a way to define herself in terms of others. Moreover, Joan's journey towards self-discovery is not without difficulties. Joan is confronted with a difficult choice between revealing her true identity and concealing it. Her life is in danger because she has become the subject of threats and attacks, aimed at preventing her from publishing a memoir about her life. Through her writing, Joan confronts her past bravely and decides to come out to the public with her true identity- without any pretences- she sees it as an opportunity to challenge who she is and who others perceive her to be. This act of bravery and authenticity validates her true identity as she comes to terms with her past and her present. The novel illustrates that finding an identity is not an easy journey, and one's past may haunt them if they try to escape from it. Through Joan's struggles, we see that an authentic identity is grounded in self-acceptance and that being true to oneself is the most important gift one can give themselves. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the need to embrace one's past, confront it, and use it to construct an authentic identity that transcends the past.

## **8. CONCLUSION:**

Margaret Atwood's novel *Lady Oracle* is an exploration of the theme of identity and how it shapes the protagonist's life. The novel is about Joan Flood, a successful author who is struggling with her identity and her perception of self. The theme of identity is present throughout the novel, particularly in the protagonist's search for self-discovery and self-acceptance. Joan's struggle with identity is largely influenced by her upbringing, particularly by her mother, who dominated her life and suppressed her individuality. Her mother's constant criticism and control have left her with deep insecurities, causing her to create multiple identities as a means of escaping her suppressed self. She creates the character of Louisa K. Delacourt, a romantic novelist, to escape from her real life and to explore her own desires, interests, and emotions. Louisa becomes a part of Joan's identity, and the lines between the two blur as the novel progresses. One of the most significant themes in *Lady Oracle* is the idea that identity is not fixed; instead, it is fluid and constantly evolving. Joan's search for self-discovery and self-acceptance shows that identity is not only shaped by our past experiences, but also by our present actions and choices. This is evident in the different identities Joan creates for herself in the novel, each of which reflects a different aspect of her personality. Another theme related to identity in the novel is the idea of performance. Joan's multiple identities are, in a sense, performances that she puts on for different audiences. Whether it is as a successful author, a romantic novelist, or a fat woman trying to find acceptance, Joan is always performing for others. However, as the novel progresses, she begins to realize that she cannot continue to perform for others without sacrificing her true identity. In conclusion, *Lady Oracle* is a novel that explores the theme of identity and how it shapes the protagonist's life. Joan's struggle to accept herself and find her true identity is a powerful exploration of the human experience. The novel is a reminder that identity is not fixed, and that it is important to embrace our true selves, regardless of our past or present circumstances. Through Joan's journey, we are reminded that accepting oneself is an ongoing process, and that it is through self-acceptance that we can find true happiness and fulfilment.

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