

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES  
**“Cat’s Eye”**

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SAMPLE

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## AUTHOR NOTES

Margaret Atwood was born on 18 November 1939 in Ottawa. Her father Dr Carl Atwood was a forest entomologist. Her mother Margaret Atwood (nee Killam) was a home economics graduate from the University of Toronto.

Atwood's early childhood was spent in the Quebec and northern Ontario forests where she amused herself investigating insects while her father conducted his research. Her poems contain many references to nature, reflecting this scientific background. She did not attend a full year of school until Grade 8. Her parents were both enthusiastic readers and encouraged her to be as well. She began to write while still in primary school. When Atwood was seven years old her family settled in Toronto, where her father taught at the university. During her school years, Atwood excelled in science. She went on to do an Honours degree in English at the University of Toronto and an MA at Harvard, specialising in Nineteenth Century literature. She worked at various professions, including being a scriptwriter for films before becoming an academic and then a professional writer. Atwood taught English at several Canadian universities, has been a lecturer in creative writing, and Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama.

She has published more than twenty books of various kinds, including fourteen books of poetry, three books of short stories and more than a dozen novels. She also draws and paints. Atwood is a diverse writer whose work encompasses many different genres. She is a strong supporter of women's rights and a number of her books deal with feminist issues. However she resists being stereotyped as a feminist writer since her views on the relationships between the sexes are more subtle. She is interested in how cultures form people and the struggle against powerlessness and social moulding.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Atwood's novel makes references to a number of social trends and historical events that Elaine experiences throughout her life. The novel switches from its present day which is probably late 1980's to early 1990s based on the references to the architectural changes in Toronto and the fashion trends of the androgynous youth that Elaine identifies on Toronto streets; to the past of her childhood in war time Canada. The war years were a relatively carefree time for Elaine because of her family life on the road. The Second World War didn't appear to impinge on her family although she does describe the rations and playing endless war games with Stephen. Elaine describes being educated about the effects of the German bombing campaign in Britain and the allied campaign in Europe. Later her art teacher and lover Josef is referred to as a displaced person because he left Europe at the end of the war under the displaced persons immigration schemes to allied countries like the United States, Canada and Australia.

The family move to Toronto when Elaine turned eight signalled the beginning of a more traditional family unit living in a new house. Elaine's parents adopted a version of the 1950's traditional family roles where the father was the bread winner and the mother the homemaker. Elaine's father was a university professor and began dressing in suits and ties while the mother was attired in dresses, stockings and attractive coats. This change of dress from their time on the road caused Elaine to view her parents in a new light. Her mother did not quite fit the stereotypical housewife as she enjoyed going for long walks by herself and both parents saw the garden as a joint project. Her parents did not adhere to strict religious beliefs but rather were free thinkers. Such heathen attitudes were regarded critically by Elaine's school friends and their parents.

Elaine's move to high school signalled a chronicle of the fashion of the late 1950's and early 1960's as Atwood documented the changing fashion of Claudia and Elaine. Atwood explores the life of the teenager as Elaine muses on the differences between her understanding of boys and their fears and Claudia's swooning over popular music, actors and dreamy boys at her school. Elaine discusses their dating rituals and intimates that Claudia is not prepared to exert the boundaries that are an essential part of teenage dating in this period – Claudia is far too promiscuous.

The novel makes reference to the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s particularly the notions of feminism and sexual liberation. Elaine lives in two worlds – University studying Art and Archaeology and night school studying life drawing. Elaine regards the other girls studying her University course as having the traditional desires of marriage and a family. Elaine at first conforms to these values in her dress and conversation, but as her art education continues she adopts a more non conformist value system. She begins dressing in head to toe black as the men in the life drawing class do and she spends her time with these same men drinking beer in the ladies parlour at the local hotels. Elaine is continuing a lifelong trend of being more comfortable with men but she is also following beatnik art culture of the 1960's where people were rebelling against traditional art forms, music and lifestyles.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's Elaine joins women's feminist groups which decry all males and tell stories of oppression and abuse. Elaine feels an outsider among these women as she was heterosexual, a mother and did not feel she had been oppressed by men. The breakup of her marriage and her subsequent suicide attempt appeared to contradict her thoughts about men being allies. Her move to British Columbia with her daughter allows her a new beginning. Atwood is not portraying Elaine as a victim of oppressive men in her novel; her central character maintains two relationships at the one time, decides to leave her husband when he is unfaithful and find camaraderie with other single mothers. Ultimately Elaine makes traditional choices in her decision to marry Ben.