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## ***THE SYMBOLISM OF REBIRTH IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S SURFACING***

**Keywords:** *nature; death drive; water; maternity; journey; selfdiscovery*

**Abstract:** *The article sets out to discuss the death drive of civilization described in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing and the individual possibility of rebirth she envisages. The unnamed first person narrator is afraid she isn't alive, she thinks she had allowed herself to be cut into two. One aspect of this death of feeling is the discontinuity she has willed between herself and her parents, because she felt she couldn't ever go home again after having accepted to have an abortion. She had taken refuge into telling herself lies, reshaping events into a different story. When she returns home to look for her father who has disappeared, she dives into a lake and this contact with the water produces an epiphany, a reconnection with the deepest layers of her (unconscious) self and also with the memories of her parents. The author demonstrates that Atwood conveys the Narrator's spiritual rebirth by the symbolic images of water/, ascent/descent and plunging/resurfacing against the general archetypal pattern of the external/internal journey. The Narrator's rebirth does not bring with it innocence, but selfknowledge and knowledge of the corrupted/imperfect world she lives in.*

The article sets out to discuss the death drive of civilization described in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and the individual possibility of rebirth she envisages. The nameless Narrator returns to her native Quebec when her brother informs her of their Father's disappearance. She comes accompanied by Joe, her boyfriend, and David and Anne, a married couple who are her friends. This actual journey becomes a symbolical journey after her "buried life", to use Arnold's metaphor for her deep self, articulated in her "quest for meaningful identity" (Moss 123).

From the first paragraph of the narrative the nature in northern Ontario is described as dying, the birch "disease spreading up from the south". The "Big Brother" in the South becomes the embodiment of a death spreading "civilization", the whole narrative being pervaded by an anti-American spirit. David calls them "fascist pig Yanks" (39). For the Narrator they are "the pervasive menace to Canada"(189), promoting damage to nature (121) and changing humans into machines (165) in a gradually deadening process (166, 184) until in the end the Narrator affirms that her co-nationals "are all Americans now" (169), and her country "sold or drowned; the flood would depend on who got elected, not here but somewhere else"(132), an image that steers off the destructive valence of water. The Americans kill the heron just for the pleasure of killing, just to show "they had the power to kill" (116) but they string it up "like a lynch victim", which emphasizes the fact that their killing does not stop to animals. But the Narrator has a strong fellow feeling with animals and plants that die to feed us, as she states: "we are eaters of death" (140).

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Americans destroy both nature and human nature, that is real feelings. This is what happened to her when her lover, who had not told her he had a wife and children, had arranged for her to have an abortion, considering that the fetus is not a human being yet, but an animal. The Narrator had agreed, but afterwards she realized she is only half-alive, as her capacity for feeling is dead (105). Afraid she isn't alive (111), she thinks she had allowed herself to be cut into two. She feels diminished, having discarded the natural function of her body as well as her soul, her capacity for human feeling: "I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb" (108).

One aspect of this death of feeling is the discontinuity she has willed between herself and her parents, because she felt she couldn't ever go home again, the gulf between them having become unbridgeable: "They were from another age, prehistoric, when everyone got married and had a family, children growing in the yard like sunflowers" (144). She had not even given them her address, but a post-office box. Her brother too, also evaded his parents after he left (69), which shows that this break with the parents is characteristic of the whole generation. Her friends too "all disowned their parents long ago, the way you are supposed to: Joe never mentions his father and mother, Anna says they are nothing people and David calls them The Pigs" (17). Yet the protagonist-narrator cares enough for her parents to come looking for her missing father, an attitude which embarrasses the friends.

The Narrator's father stands for reason, and like the great thinkers of the Enlightenment (=the Age of Reason) he is an atheist. As he believes that Christianity is against reason and therefore distorts things (55) he has also inculcated this belief into the Narrator. His exclusive reliance on reason, a value that had bred the project of the colonization of nature during the Enlightenment, makes him an ally of the Americans in their destruction/colonization of nature, Canadian nature included, as we understand from the somewhat vague description of his job.

The mother does not articulate her creed, she embodies it: the narrator recurrently remembers her managing to feed the jays and other birds from the tray in her hands because she keeps "standing quiet as a tree" (52, 107). It is an image that acquires an iconic value, suggesting the symbolic equivalence mother=nature=nurture. At the same time the image identifies the mother with tree of life, woman becomes the principle of life itself. On the other hand, her parents' marriage implicitly represents the husband's view of marriage as a practical arrangement which excludes all emotion. The Narrator is struck by the record of mere fact and the total absence of all of feelings and opinions in her mother's diary. Moreover, David's attitude to his wife is not only oppressive – she forces her to make up all the time to correspond to his image of femininity, but even aggressive: he forces her to pose naked for his snap shots video clips. His attitude is openly sexist and although he pretends to value women as equals they are but sex objects to him. Her own husband had been extremely possessive and behaved as if he owned her, treating her like an incubator when she was pregnant, because he just wanted a replica of himself. After the baby was born she felt she "was no more use" (34). "It is such attitudes that determine J. Brooks Bronson's interpretation that *Surfacing* "rejects the masculinist culture - which is depicted as rationalistic and dangerously aggressive- and idealizes a nature-identified femininity" (39). This interpretation is on the whole right, but in her father's case the

narrator does not see things in black and white, but uses a rich range of grays. First, her absence of memories to the contrary implies that the parents' relationship was a balanced, probably harmonious one.

Moreover, it is also significant that it is her Father who sets her half-dead self on a quest for a spiritual power by the copies he has made of some prehistoric Indian rock paintings. The Narrator finds letters that show that some researchers believe the sites of these cave paintings were for the Natives ancient "abodes of powerful or protective spirits", and they were "associated with the practice of fasting to produce significant or predictive dreams" (102-103). The Narrator decides to take her friends on a trip to White Birch Lake to look for the old Indian paintings, but when the location proves to be a wrong deduction from her father's papers, she decides to make a second attempt on her own after inferring they might be underwater, as the water level of the lake had risen some six meters. .

And it is now that she has her epiphany, in a moment of reconnection with the deepest layers of her (unconscious) self. After repeated dives, she has her vision of "a dead thing, a dark oval trailing limbs, it had eyes" (142). It was a blurred vision of her aborted fetus, and image that brings home to her the evil of her life-denying gesture, which had trespassed against the sanctity of life, the image of the wrapped up remains becoming in her mind the "chalice of an evil grail" (143) of a civilization whose lay religion is sheer rational practicality. She has a revelation of her complicity in the murder of the baby, although it hadn't been her idea, but her lover's. Having dealt death by her consent, she had become "a killer" (145), and thus had allowed the illegal abortionists to plant death in her "like a seed" (144).

The vision she has in the waters of the lake, reconnect her with her true self that she had denied then, and it was under her father's supervision as "after the failure of logic" (145) he had recognized the existence of a metaphysical plane. It is her father who enables her to come into contact with a transcendent power that by inducing the sense of her guilt restore her power of feeling and bring about the rebirth of her dead half: "These gods, here on the shore or in the water, unacknowledged or forgotten, were the only ones who had given me anything I needed and freely" (145), namely a reconnection with her body and soul.

And this reconnection omplies putting an end to the strategy she had adopted in order to cope with her evil deed: "I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a *different version*" (143, my emphasis). She had taken refuge into telling herself lies, had reshaped the characters and events into a different story and come close to believing it herself, a story where she is blameless, a mere victim: her adulterous lover is transfigured into a possessive husband who behaves as if he owns her. He uses her just to have a child, so that she feels like an object, "an incubator" (84) and totally useless after the birth of the baby. As the father just wants to turn the boy into a replica of himself, she decides to abandon them both and get a divorce.

Joyce Carol Oates calls *Surfacing* a "lyric, quasi-mystical", indeed. We may say that the Narrator's repeated dives in the lakes are suggestive of shamans' healing rituals. Mircea Eliade tells us that in Amerindians' view an illness comes from trespassing the taboos disturbing therefore the sacred, or can be caused by the abduction of the soul by a dead person. In order to find the soul and bring it back into

the body of the sick person, the shaman makes an ecstatic journey to heaven or the deep of the sea to the Mother of Animals (270), the Mother of Sea Animals being a mythical expression of the Great Mother of Beasts, spring and matrix of universal life (274).

I think the lake waters become a symbol of the amniotic fluid that reconnects the Narrator to the Spirit of universal life and bring about her rebirth. By this contact the Narrator thus induces her own metamorphosis as Eliade specifies that any INUIT can call the spirits by a certain method (276) as they believe in the possibility of communicating with the souls of the dead (277) and that any North American Indian can get a “protecting spirit”, or “a power” that helps him have visions and increase his reserve of the sacred (277).<sup>A</sup> The Narrator feels the guidance of her father in getting to apprehend the presence of a transcendent power that has helped revive feeling in her (146).

The Indians did not own salvation but they had once known where it lived and their signs marked the sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth...He had discovered new places, new oracles, they were things he was seeing the way I had seen, true vision; at the end, after the failure of logic. (145)

But this is only the initial moment of the narrator’s rebirth. She knows it is going to be a process: feeling has returned to the dead half of her self, but she needs to get an insight into an identity she can live with. And in order to do so she repudiates her father’s initial legacy – reason, logic and language, she decides to reject time and history and descend into nature and primitiveness, which might be her mother’s legacy. But she knows she must have a gift from both, that she must communicate with both her parents. The gift of her father’s evolution has been the maps of the Indian caves and the contact with universal spirituality which worships the Eternal Spirit of life, a glimpse of the possible existence of the transcendent. Eliade has found out that certain tribes believe that in order to become visionary, young men and women must first fall ill, have dreams and pass through a fit of transitory madness (Eliade 94) or go through an abolition of time (297), and this is what the Narrator experiences. She projects the fantasy, or has the hallucination of becoming a natural woman feeding on what the earth offers and using no product of civilization like an axe, a machete or a knife, She decides to go out of history and of language, that is from what is the essence of humanity. Her communication with her mother has been a return of her own drawing of herself in her mother’s womb, which she had made in her childhood, therefore a reaffirmation of the principle of maternity as the permanent law of nature. Her father too reappears to her in a vision “as if through water” (186) to transmit a similar message : “he has realized he was an intruder...and wants it ended, the borders abolished, he wants the forest to flow back into the places of his mind cleared: reparation” (186). But she becomes aware it’s not her father that she beholds, but what he has become staying alone in the bush too long a time. He now has “yellow eyes, wolf’s eyes (187), and image that suggests that he too has become a natural man, that

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<sup>A</sup> I have not mentioned the purifying valence of water symbolism associated with baptism because ,as I have mentioned, Christian spirituality is absent in the novel.

he no longer approves of his former job as a surveyor for the government or a private timber firm. But the symbolism of the wolf is more complex. Not only is he one of the animals the shaman can metamorphose himself during his ecstatic journey (Eliade 100), for the Greeks (and the Nordics) the wolf has positive connotations, he becomes a symbol of light because he can see in the dark, and he is associated with Apollo (Chevalier and Gheerbrant: loup). At the same time the wolf is one of the few animal species that is monogamous. Thus the message his presence conveys is that of the couple as an archetypal law of nature, and in the end the Narrator decides for a new beginning, namely to give herself a chance as a human by starting a life with Joe, whose baby she is probably carrying. After this communication with her parents comes with an end; she has a final dream of them is a boat taking them out of the bay for good. The process of her rebirth is finally complete, she has taken a plunge into the animal state but she decides to resurface as a human being, because she is carrying a new human being inside her. She has taken in her parents' message "to prefer life" (188), the life of her species to whose perpetuation she is contributing and whose natural evolution implies reason and language, as the alternative would be death (191). It is not however a triumphant ending, but one that needs qualifications.

Philip Kokotailo groups the interpretations of the novel in two opposite readings. The more popular one is the thesis reading, namely that "*Surfacing* constitutes a *rite de passage* from which the nameless narrator emerges a newly integrated and realized self "the supporters of it being such critics as Josie P. Campbell, Sherrill Grace, William C. James, Catherine McLay, John Moss, Annis Pratt, and Jerome H. Rosenberg. The promoters of the less popular antithesis reading of *Surfacing* -Robert Lecker, Eli Mandel, and Rosemary Sullivan- are "united in their belief that the narrator does not emerge from her experience a new integrated self in harmony with the world" (Kokotailo1). Sullivan, for example, concludes that "the quest for insight in the novel has been pursued by a process of decreation, a disengagement from time, from history, from language, but no bridge to re-engagement has been discovered" (39), and therefore regards *Surfacing* as an alienated book.

However I think that the Narrator has found a bridge under the guidance of her parents. After she had the revelation of her own taint of evil in a corrupted consumerist world she will have to live with this knowledge and assume her responsibility. She decides "to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone" (191). The narrator realizes that, in the real world, there are no gods to help her now, but she has had a trance experience of the eternal principle of life. She regrets them, "but they give only one kind of truth, one hand" (189), and she has found out that the truth is more complex. She becomes aware that, in the real world, there is "no total salvation, resurrection" (189), and that the knowledge she has brought back from a submergence into her primitive nature is that she cannot give up reason and language because they are the essence of (her) humanity, but her new, reborn self will live without self delusion. In a postmodern key the Narrator's spiritual journey ends opening a window on only a possibly successful future relationship with Joe, a glimpse of possible continuity with the parents' tradition of a family. Nevertheless, she has chosen a man whose values are definitely not American, a man who feels and values love, a man who being "half-

formed” still has a prospect of growth through her: “Perhaps for him I am the entrance, as the lake was the entrance for me” (146-147). Atwood conveys the Narrator’s spiritual rebirth by the symbolic images of water/maternity and ascent/descent and plunging/resurfacing against the general archetypal pattern of the external/internal journey. The Narrator’s rebirth does not bring with it innocence, but self knowledge and knowledge of the corrupted/imperfect world she lives in.

In a conversation she has with her friend about how to keep a marriage together, Anna tells her that she is lucky not to have had any children. The narrator then thinks:

She doesn't have any herself; if she did she couldn't have said that to me. I've never told her about the baby; I haven't told Joe either, there's no reason to. He won't find out the usual way, there aren't any pictures of it peering out from a crib or a window or through the bars of a playpen in my bureau drawer or my billfold where he could stumble across them and act astonished or outraged or sad. I have to behave as though it doesn't exist, because for me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget. (48)

In this passage, the narrator strays close to the truth. She has no pictures of her child, of course, because it does not exist. What she has fabricated into a birth was really an abortion. Here, the narrator is no longer claiming to have abandoned her son. She says, to the contrary, that he was taken from her. Then she stumbles dangerously close to reality, calling it a section of her own life sliced off from her, her own flesh cancelled. The reader sees, though only in retrospect or a second reading, that the truth is too much for her to bear. Because she cannot cope with the reality of what happened, she must forget. To do so, she constructs a slightly more bearable version, one that she can live with, one that she comes to believe is the truth itself.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator attempts to expand this false personal history that she has created to save herself from its true harshness. She tries to fabricate her family into others by calling them “they” and divorcing them from herself. Immediately, however, she says “That won't work. I can't call them ‘they’ as if they were someone else's family. I have to keep myself from telling that story” (14). This recognition marks a turning point. The narrator can no longer continue to build up an autobiography of lies to believe in. The elaborately controlled and integrated order that she has imposed on the reality of her own life has reached its height when the story begins. The novel traces its demise.

By the end of Part I, the narrator has begun the process of deconstruction. Thinking about the difference between life in the city and life in the bush, she wonders how she has been able to live in the city for such a long time, not feeling safe there. Here on this island in the bush, though, she remembers that she always felt safe, even at night. Immediately, however, she corrects herself, forcefully. “That's a lie, my own voice says out loud. I think hard about it, considering it, and it is a lie” (73). Again, the narrator stops herself from contributing anew to the false but more pleasant version of the past that she has invented. This time she goes even further. Recognizing that she herself is the only source for the authentic version of her past, she resolves to pursue memories honestly and faithfully.

One page later, she takes the important first step toward the destruction of the protective system she has fabricated; she admits her brother did not drown, that their mother saved him. On several previous occasions, as in the very opening of the novel, she has made references to her brother which reveal the two of them alive at the same time much later in life. Because of the inconsistency, something has to give way; either these references or her claim that her brother drowned before she was born must be false; both cannot be true. Her claim fails. At their dock, she states quite simply, "This was where he drowned, he got saved only by accident" (74). Thus she attacks the weakest of her fabrications first.

The entire structure falls to pieces near the end of Part II when the narrator goes diving to find one of the Indian rock paintings that her father was mapping out at the time of his disappearance. Near the bottom of the lake, at the base of a cliff, she discovers what the reader assumes to be her father's dead body, but at the time the narrator states, "It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead" (142). After she flees, panic stricken, to the surface, the image forms again in her mind. At first she thinks it is the image of her drowned brother, but she has previously renounced this lie and she now discards it again, saying: "it couldn't be him, he had not drowned after all, he was elsewhere, Then I recognized it; it wasn't ever my brother I'd been remembering, that had been a disguise" (143). In other words, she is taking the important step of admitting that she has been disguising reality. She is now on the verge of stripping away the crucial illusion that lies at the heart of the subterfuge she has been living.

What she recognizes is, of course, an image of her aborted fetus. She describes it as being curled up in a bottle, "staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills." She says that when she awoke from the operation and saw the bottle, "I knocked it off the table, my life on the floor, glass egg and shattered blood, nothing could be done." But now, not even this illusion can stand. She immediately re-establishes the truth by stating, "That was wrong, I never said it. They scraped it into a bucket and threw it wherever they throw them, it was travelling through the sewers by the time I woke, back to the sea, I stretched my hand up to it and it vanished" (143). Finally, after having acknowledged the reality of her true past in all its horror, she openly admits that she has constructed a false reality to protect herself from it.

It was all real enough, it was enough reality for ever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over the wrong parts. A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I'd lived in it until now (143-44).

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