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Study of novels of Margaret Atwood

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Abstract : Atwood, a proud Canadian, used literature as a tool to develop her cultural and personal consciousness. "We must know our own literature to know ourselves," she writes in Survival, "and to know ourselves accurately, we need to know it as part of literature as a whole." Since Atwood's writing comes from this tradition, she also relates her own concerns while defining Canadian literature. She believes that survival is the primary reality in Canada, and that the demands of a harsh environment have had a significant impact on both Canadian culture and way of life. According to Atwood, the Canadian quest for territorial identity—or, as literary scholar Northrop Frye phrased it, "Where is here?"—is closely tied to this pivotal act of survival.

Atwood's heroines invariably come to the realisation that they are emotional refugees, foreigners in a place they can identify but cannot feel at home in. They are not only cut off from their surroundings, but they are also cut off from language, making communication a process of decoding. Their emotions of alienation stem in large part from a culture that, by turning everything into commodities, seeks to annihilate them. Although men are also threatened, women are specifically targeted as products, something to be ornamented and sold as commodities. In fact, despite the fact that Atwood's "Americans" represent exploitation and frequently turn out to be Canadian citizens, Canadian identity as a whole is in risk of being subsumed by an affluent American society.

Atwood employs a variety of narrative devices to support the ambivalence of her characters. Their emotional coldness is reflected in her astringent writing, and its sarcastic reserve shows their wariness. Her characters' depth and the hostile environments they must endure are both hinted at by the frequent paradoxes in her writing. Atwood creates vivid fictional landscapes that humorously comment on the precarious status of contemporary men and women through the deft juxtaposition of past and present through the use of flashbacks. There is still some hope since her characters survive with a deeper comprehension of their surroundings. The fact remains that life goes on.

Surfacing

Surfacing examines new dimensions of the Bildungsroman and was the first of Atwood's books to garner attention from critics and discussion. What could have been a typical self-discovery story evolves into a moving quest for self-recovery with legendary implications that is made understandable by Atwood's deft use of symbol and ritual. Atwood also challenges the romantic literary trope of ultimate self-realization as a justifiable end. This suggestively satirical book should not be read to accept the heroine's ultimate emergence as a goal in and of itself.

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The anonymous protagonist of Surfacing travels back to the Canadian wilderness where she was raised in the hopes of finding her missing father with the help of Joe, her boyfriend, and David and Anna, a married couple. She has been abruptly recalled from a life in the city that has been characterised by emotional anaesthesia brought on by both personal and professional failures. The protagonist begins a more significant internal probe to find lost "gifts" from both parents as her exterior hunt continues. She aspires to regain her lost capacity for feeling through these. But in order to succeed, she will have to reveal the lie that is her life.

When she recalls Anna's inquiry, "Do you have a twin?" at the beginning of her story, the protagonist alerts her audience that she has lived a double life. She claims not to have one because, based on her apparent belief in the intricate deception she has concocted about a fictitious marriage, divorce, and child abandonment, she appears to think she does. The heroine has cut herself off from everyone as an extra measure of security. As though they were someone else's family, she addresses her own as "they." She has only known Anna, who is referred to as her best friend, for two months, but her friendship with Joe is unique for its coldness.

The protagonist attempts to escape the repercussions of her acts by surrounding herself with acquaintances whose line of work, the production of the eponymously named film Random Samples, demonstrates their rootlessness. In fact, she calls herself an escape artist as well as a commercial artist, meaning that she feels like she has sold out. The protagonist feels as though she is in unfamiliar terrain as she reluctantly returns to the past she had hoped to leave behind.

She is an outsider in a number of telling ways, including being of English descent in French territory, not practising Roman Catholicism or any religion at all among the devout, and being a woman in a patriarchal society. As a result, it is not surprising that she feels alienated by the place where she spent her formative years. She speaks French so haltingly that someone may mistake her for an American, which is another another example of displacement brought on by immigrants. She is a stranger to herself most of all. In order to prevent a deeper intimate loss of innocence, she is consumed by the American usurpation of Canada and its heinous rape of untamed wilderness rather than her own self-alienation.

The heroine may come to realise that the forest is not completely benign. Her encounter and reaction to a senselessly killed heron make her feel complicit, which makes her consider how she and her brother colluded to subject animals to animal studies when they were kids. When the heroine's attempt to find solace in her innocence as a child is thwarted, she continues looking. Nature supplies knowledge once again since she eventually identifies her aborted kid and her role in its murder by giving in to her lover's demands after seeing her father's body stuck under water. In a broader sense, she accepts death as a natural part of existence and reclaims her role in the life-process by becoming pregnant with Joe's kid.

She seduces her boyfriend in a ritual that resembles ancient fertility rites. She then goes through a methodical purge after being certain that she is pregnant in order to reach reality's absolute

core. The main character learns about her parents' gifts along the way—her mother's gift of life and her father's gift of sight. She takes an oath declaring that she will not be a victim when her body and mind have been linked. She no longer feels like a victim or an outsider and is able to enter her own moment feeling whole.

The intricate process Atwood uses to bring her character to this condition of consciousness is astounding. The protagonist continues to convey her story by describing what she sees despite her mistrust of language. Much of her description appears to be factual because she is no longer able to feel, but the reader soon learns how fallible her impressions can be. As lies converge, contradictions abound, and opinion presented as fact turns out to be untrue, there is a great deal of doubt. Any straightforward conclusion to Surfacing is impossible given the burden of intricacy. Atwood clearly suggests a short-lived union with Joe, but this is a far cry from fixing the heroine's problem. After all, the outside world has not changed. As a result, Atwood's open-ended finale is both fitting and believable because it would be giving in to the very romantic cliches that her literature subverts if all problems were solved.

Life Before Man

After Lady Oracle's gothic comedy, Life Before Man looks especially bleak. However, it is clear how similar it is to all of Atwood's books. Its probing analysis of modern relationships strips away the protecting layers of deceptions, exposing the main characters' frail selves with merciless precision. Adrift in a culture that is disintegrating, Lesje Green, Elizabeth, and Nate Schoenh of fight to live. Atwood highlights aspects of each character that haven't yet been shown.

At the Royal Ontario Museum, where Lesje works as a palaeontologist and Elizabeth as a publicist, wildness and culture collide in this book. Quebec's rural areas are hardly necessary because the country's culture already resembles a jungle. The present, unlike the Mesozoic, foresees its own extinction due to a wealth of evidence, including pollution, separatist movements, political unrest, lost traditions, and disintegrating families. In its own trash, humanity is in risk of drowning. Life appears to have lost all sense of predictability; even holidays feel pointless. However, the novel is captivated by the past, the behaviour of animals, both modern and extinct, and the preservation of memory, especially as it details family histories.

A violent death triggers emotional detachment, same like in Surfacing. Elizabeth Schoenhof is most affected because Chris, her lover, blew off his head as a final act of defiance and the ultimate means of escape. His acts shatter Elizabeth's sense of security, which she has in her house as well as in her capacity to influence or foresee the behaviour of others. Elizabeth, a master manipulator, tries to get everyone to behave as sanely as she does. It should come as no surprise that Elizabeth has at least two personalities, each speaking a distinct language, including street slang and genteel style, and that what passes for "civilised" behaviour is really

just a way to avoid facing real human emotions like love, loss, rejection, and wrath. In fact, although giving social decorum a superficial nod, every character in the book prefers escape over self-realization.

The greater world, a political society ablaze with separatist enthusiasm, reflects the characters' rebellious feelings. Nate aligns with René Lévesque, who is gaining support for the independence of Quebec and the restoration of French as the dominant language, which threatens to replace English. As the world proceeds toward separation on an international, national, and personal level, the world does indeed appear to be breaking apart. Separation doesn't work as a solution, though, because no matter how far the characters run, they are still burdened by their pasts.

Despite the ongoing influence of the previous, chaotic world, each character makes an effort to create a new, stable one while feeling like a refugee in dangerous land. After abandoning his mother's fruitless idealistic causes to save the world, Nate develops feelings for Lesje, whom he imagines as a beautiful subtropical island free of restrictions. Lesje roams the prehistoric landscape in search of a return to childhood while Elizabeth spends some time in a tidy area between her bed and the ceiling. The characters find replacements when these fantasies lose some of their lustre, forcing the reader to reconsider the book's potential.

Life Before Man is not without hope, despite its depressing tone, gritty depiction of a collapsing civilisation, sense of alienation and hopelessness, and rejection of easy answers. At the conclusion of this book, every character has obtained something they coveted. Lesje is now pregnant with Nate's child, who in turn strengthens Lesje's dedication to life by dislodging her preoccupation with death. Nate also has Lesje. After casting out the demons from her past, Elizabeth feels her ability to feel things directly return.

Bodily Harm

Rennie Wilford from Bodily Harm has left her past, the oppressive society of Griswold, Ontario, much like the narrator of Surfacing had, in order to find moderate success as a freelance writer. Rennie sees in Clark Griswold moral principles of duty, sacrifice, and decency that are considered amusing by modern standards. Women are severely constrained in this society to designated roles that hardly elevate them above the status of servants. With its emphasis on mobility and fashions like slave-girl bracelets and obscene art, Rennie greatly loves city life. In fact, Rennie has become an authority on precisely these trends and is so skilled at it that she is equally at home describing or creating one. Rennie struggles to accept the reality of her malignant breast because it appears to be so healthy because she has learned to only look at the surface.

Her cancer acts as the central metaphor in the story, affecting everything from ailing personal connections to a political uprising on St. Antoine. Indeed, moral cancer seems to have spread

throughout the world. The signs are obvious: Sincerity is a liability, people don't want to hear about problems, friends are "contacts," partners are rapists, and pharmacists are drug pushers. The rioting cells in Rennie's breast are a reflection of how out-of-control what were once healthy forms of human business have become. Rennie discovers a quick escape route by obtaining a magazine assignment on St. Antoine when she is met by yet another manifestation of this ailment—a would-be murderer who puts a coil of rope on her bed.

Her ambitions of being a tourist, insulated from involvement and accountability, are dashed when she is sucked into a political intrigue that poses a greater threat to her life than her cancer. She learns of the upcoming election before arriving in St. Antoine, disbelieving Dr. Minnow's references to shady dealings and political corruption. She finds his remark about the "lovely Canadians" to be the most perplexing part of their chat. She wonders if he is being ironic or not. Little is revealed by her cursory observations of island life, despite the abundance of material that testifies to a cataclysmic eruption. Rennie doesn't seem as concerned about the widespread poverty and casual violence as she is about avoiding sunburn and being arrested for drug possession. Because of her blindness, Lora Lucas, a strong survivor of numerous harmful events, and Paul, the local source for drugs and guns, manipulate Rennie into real, albeit reluctant, substantial involvement.

Paul's sexual attention is significant to Rennie because it serves as a physical connection to life, and he values the significance of his touch. His hands summon the "missing" hands of Lora's bitten hands, her doctor's hands, and the hands that either provide or deny assistance. Like Canada's offer of canned hams and Rennie's help, Paul's "aid" to the feuding political factions is highly dubious, and the outcomes are the opposite of what was intended. Rennie tries to flee from his failed scheme, which forces her to face her own guilt.

Rennie wants to change her life and become a reporter to reveal the truth if she makes it through this nightmare. But once more, Atwood raises doubts about this option. Rennie regularly misinterprets situations and makes errors in what she observes. She may have written her entire life's narrative in a jail journal, detailing how she got there. She employs the future tense to predict her release from prison. Atwood doesn't really care about this because Rennie has been restored in a way she never expected. Rennie ultimately epitomises the best of Griswold with a clear understanding of what lies beneath the surface of human reality as he strokes Lora's damaged hand.

The Handmaid's Tale

Atwood's story shifts from the realistic to the fantastical in The Handmaid's Tale, but she doesn't do anything more than follow the political fervour of the 1980s to its logical—and terrifying—end. America in the latter half of the 20th century erupts into political and religious conflicts while being engulfed in a swill of pollution, promiscuity, pornography, and venereal

disease. The Republic of Gilead emerges from the ashes, a theocracy with such a reactionary bent that it channels women into roles as daughters, wives, Marthas (maids), econowives, and handmaids (mistresses).

The first set of Handmaids, fertile women allocated to powerful government figures, includes the narrator Offred (alluding to her status as a possession of her master). Offred paints a terrifyingly accurate image of a culture turning to fundamentalist principles for stability by weaving between her history and present in flat, almost lifeless prose. Her writing initially appears to be a report from an observer that is accurate. As the novel progresses, viewers learn that Offred is numb as a result of all the changes in her life. In addition, she has little faith in anyone, least of all herself. She is determined to survive as a survivor, even if it means taking risks.

She is aware that emotion is fleeting, frequently unstable, and impossible to measure. Perhaps this explains why her portrayal of other characters in the book looks distant. Offred can only infer purpose by observing gestures, facial expressions, and voice tones. Even the simplest sentence may include an essential message that is implicit. Offred begins by decoding the Latin inscription she discovers etched in her wardrobe: "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum." This allows her to decode all forms of communication. However, even this admonition, which serves as her slogan, is tainted. Offred is anxious to communicate, yet she carefully hides her own message. Her effort to comprehend echoes Atwood's well-known issue of our inability to fully comprehend another person or circumstance.

Conclusion

The ambivalence of Atwood's characters is understandable given their setting and time. Traditions that are dead or dying keep them from going back to a time that most people have rejected. Their future is unimaginable, and their present is at best fleeting. Her heroines, who have been emotionally damaged, delve into their conscious and unconscious experiences in an effort to regain feeling and find a way to identify with the present.

Atwood frequently frames her characters' struggles in terms of a journey, which acts as a reinforcing metaphor for inward inquiries: Lesje Green of Life, the unidentified protagonist of Surfacing, makes a return to the wilderness of Quebec. Rennie Wilford of Bodily Harm flies to the rebel islands of Ste. Agathe and St. Antoine before Man walks through supposed Mesozoic forests. These archaic locations establish the division between nature and civilization by putting contemporary culture in sharp relief, giving Atwood's heroines fresh insight into their own reality. They are able to see people and locations in relation to one another rather than as separate objects. But in the end, not much is resolved because Atwood's books have ambiguous conclusions. Her heroines accept who they are and maintain their distance from one another.

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