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A Quest of Her Own in Nature: A Psychoanalytical Study of Atwood's Surfacing

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Abstract

Surfacing is one of Margaret Atwood's most successful works. Accordingly, the novel has been studied from diverse points of view. This paper intends to present a psychoanalytical study of the protagonist of the novel according to theories of Kristeva and Jung. Surfacing is the story of a woman who uses the quest form in order to find her lost father, her identity, and her past ties. This unnamed protagonist is one who feels a sense of loss and melancholia; she exhibits strange behavior, loses her language and isolates herself. The protagonist suffers from an internal division that needs to be fixed; the whole novel deals with her journey to wholeness. The story may be interpreted as a process of individuation. Through the struggle to reclaim her identity and roots, the protagonist begins psychological journey that leads her directly in to the natural world. The nature acts as a tool of self-exploration, helping the protagonist to advance in her healing process. It is the aim of this paper to discuss how Margaret Atwood's melancholic female protagonist in Surfacing goes on a quest- journey in the wildness to deal with her sense of loss and regain a new life.

Keywords: Jung, Kristeva, nature, psychological quest, self-exploration

Introduction

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian poetess, novelist, critic, and dramatist. It is difficult to go through her oeuvre without thinking of Canada/ women. She is always afraid of losing her country/ identity: "we need to know about here [Canada], because here is where we [Canadians] live". (Atwood 1972: 19). All of Margaret Atwood's novels are novel of individuation. Although they were written over a period of roughly thirty years and differ considerably in style and tone, the central theme remained the same. The narratives deal with the formation of a female identity. Atwood's female protagonist is often split between two domains: the expectations of hegemonic patriarchal society- which would demand their adherence to a traditional feminine, passive role, or self-realization, which would require the overthrowing of stereotypical concepts. Margaret Atwood's Surfacing is a powerful and difficult book. It's very title is ambiguous. One is unable to find the exact meaning of 'Surfacing'. It has layers of meanings. "Surfacing is a deeply ambiguous and ambivalent book" (Dobson 2009: 28). In fact, "surfacing" is a gerund, indicating process and activity rather than a completed action. Surfacing charts a change in the narrator's subjective perception of reality, as she shifts from a position of alienation and victimhood to a new sense of the vital relationship between herself as human and land which inhabits (Howell 2005: 49).

Annis Pratt considers it as "a quest for rebirth and transformation" (1981:139). According to Catherine McLay, Surfacing deals with the "contemporary problems, the search for unity in a self which has become divided" (1978:32). Marilyn Yalom believes that "Surfacing depicts the chaos of the unconsciousness" (1985:76). Since the novel also deals with the suppression of artistic sensibility of woman artist and the protagonist of the novel is an artist too, Russell Brown finds in Surfacing "implications of the artist in the myth- making process" (1980:9).According to Allan Twigg, "Surfacing reflects society" (1981:220). While in Valerie Broege's opinion: Surfacing presents an analysis of "American psyche." The unnamed woman protagonist is a representative of the Canadian psyche, feminine, passive, lacking identity and suffering a victim complex (1981:122). The title of Atwood's novel is a metaphor for the "rebirth, awakening and return." In this novel, the unnamed female narrator dives into human history, into past and her psychological journey in the depths of the self. She experiences a rebirth and awakening in her past retrospection (Larkin 1988: 49).

Having a psycho-analytical perspective, this paper explores how main character overcomes her mental disorders by diving into her nature and gains a new regenerated social identity. Says Rigney, "Atwood's protagonists always explores through tradition and myth in search of a new identity and in search of a voice, a tongue, a language, an art, with which to proclaim that identity" (1987:21).

Loss of Identity

Surfacing strikes one as a work of psycho-analytical evaluation in which an unnamed female protagonist leaves back her living circumstances in order to return to Canada to find her missing father who caused her to meet her past and, thereby, to recall all her childhood recollections and feelings which end up a mental disorder. The general plot of the novel indicates the significance of the questions of self-identity: transformations between self-realization/recognition and the loss of self-identity.

This unnamed narrator faces different losses in her life which lead her to a melancholic condition. As the novel opens the narrator expresses her sadness over her mother's death, as a result of illness, and after that her father who "simply disappeared and then vanished into nothing" (Atwood 1998:. 20). She has lost both of her parents and could not come to terms with these losses and these unresolved pasts return to her present mind repeatedly. In addition to the loss of her parents, she lost her husband through divorce and this lack of love in her life adds to the previous miseries. Moreover, she also lost her child through a forced abortion and admits that she has "to behave as though it does not exist, because for [her] it can't, it was taken away from [her], exported, departed … a section of [her] own life, sliced off from [her] like a Siamese twin, [her] own flesh cancelled, lapse, relapse" (Atwood 1998: 45). All these losses affect her tremendously and lead her to a state of melancholia, alienation and isolation.

In this melancholic condition, the mythos in Jungian term works for the unnamed narrator of Surfacing. Being in a world of alienation and isolation, she leaves everything behind and prefers to have a spiritual journey into her childhood memories (Rao 1993: 88). She expresses her estrangement and alienation:

In the night I had wanted rescue, if my body could be made to sense, respond, move strongly enough, some of the red light-bulb neurons, incandescent molecules might seep into my head through the closed throat, neck membrane. Pleasure and pain are side by side they said but most of the brain is neutral; nerveless, like fat. I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it. (Atwood 1972: 128)

Such a state of mind in confusion and disorders indicate how she is in a sense of estrangement. She lives psychological traumas and is in an escape for her childhood memories. It is difficult for her to find a rational appreciation of her present living circumstances which indicate that they drive her into a sense of retrospection. The experience of a sense of meaninglessness in her life is the main reason for her to dive into all her childhood memories.

The indication of a loss of identity influences her mental life so that she behaves as if she experiences madness, as if she has a fragmented and alienated self. Sonia Mycak also expresses that Margaret Atwood's novels are principally preoccupied with the dislocated, alienated, splintered and split selves. In The Edible Woman and the "I" (the unnamed

narrator) of Surfacing, there is the dominance of the thematic basis of the divided self (Mycak 1996: 9-10; Piercy 1988: 54).

Loss of identity leads to loss of language, the narrator eventually loses language and wishes to be alone. As the narrator passes through nature during the initial part of the journey, she perceives that it becomes harder for her to communicate and she thinks "the words were coming out of [her] like the mechanical words from talking dolls, the kind with a pull tape at the back, the whole speech was unwinding" (Atwood 1998: 87) as Kristeva posits "the depressed speak of nothing, they have nothing to speak of "as they feel loss, a loss that cannot be expressed (1980 : 51).

In Julia Kristeva's view, the melancholic subject suffers a sense of loss which is not communicable. As the melancholic subject delves into sorrow she has no interest in "words, action, and even life itself" (1980:. 3). Kristeva believes that melancholia is a disorder of self-identity and sense of loss:

> Abyss of sorrow, a non-communicable grief that at times, and often on a long term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself (Jung 1980: 3).

She cannot communicate through language as she feels that no one can understand her; as a result she turns into an inarticulate person and the language becomes foreign to her. In addition to being a stranger to her mother tongue, she feels numb within her body. "I did not feel awful, I realize I didn't feel much of anything" (Atwood 1998: 106). Repeatedly, she refers to language: "I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine …"I'm trying to tell the truth", "…The voice wasn't mine, it came from someone dressed as me imitating me" (Atwood 1998: 107). As she cannot use language and share her feelings with others she feels that she "came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal" (Atwood 1998: 109). As a melancholic subject, she is "silent and without verbal or desiring bonds with others" (Kristeva 1980: 30). Without language, she becomes a heterogeneous subject rather than a unified one. She needs to use language in order to become an 'I'. In order to gain unified subjectivity one should enter the symbolic realm of language. In addition, the melancholic subject "I" isolate herself from the world, "I" withdraw into her sadness, "I" do not speak, "I" cry, and "I" may kill herself (Kristeva 2000: 47).

In case of melancholia, loss, and isolation psyche finds itself divided into two: the conscious does not accept what is happening in the unconscious (even though it is affected by it), and so the problem that caused this situation is not addressed. This scenario may lead to the development of a mental condition in the individual. As a solution to these circumstances Jung proposes the process of individuation.

Individuation

Individuation means to become a whole; a complete being, psychologically speaking. This concept has been described by Jung in the following way: "Individuation means to become a single, discrete being, and […] it also includes the idea of becoming one's own real self. Hence individuation could also be translated as 'coming to selfhood' or 'self-realization'" (Jung1928: 183). Thus, through the process of individuation a person should be able to reconcile the conscious and unconscious part of his or her Self in order to become a true individual. Instead of neglecting those things that were hidden in the unconscious, they are released and adequately assimilated.

It should be noticed that there is no standardized process of individuation; each person has to take into consideration the nature of his or her own problems and determine what is right for them. However, there are some basic steps that usually form part of such process. Marie-Louise von Franz, a Jungian psychologist, states that "the actual process of individuation […] generally begins with a wounding of the personality and the suffering that accompanies it" (1968:169); thus, the first step and also the cause of this process is an initial shock that affects the psychological stability of the individual.

At this stage the person senses that something is wrong, but being aware of something and being able to address it are two complete different things. According to von Franz's explanations on the topic of individuation, "if one focuses attention on the unconscious without rash assumptions or emotional rejection, it often breaks through a flow of helpful symbolic images" (1968:170-171). In other words, one must make a conscious decision to accept the unconscious in order for the latter to open up. When this happens, the troubled unconscious reveals a series of images and symbols that shape the archetypes that the mind is hiding. This private communication is established through the person's dreams, for "the language […] of the unconscious are symbols, and the means of communication dreams" (Freeman 1933: viii). The importance of dreams is one of the main points of Jung's analytical psychology.

Now that the person has made contact with the archetypes of his or her unconscious, it is time to face them. This does not mean that they should all be confronted and eliminated; in each of them there might be something useful from which the individual might be benefited: "every personification of the unconscious –the shadow, the anima, the animus, and the Self – has both a light and dark aspect" (von Franz 234). The individual must deal with the archetypes and decide if they are representations of something negative they should overcome, or of a valuable lesson they should accept, nurture and follow. This is one of the most difficult problems in the process of individuation; however, the individual "has gained access to the sources of psychic life, and this is the beginning of the cure" (Jung 1933: 242).

In Surfacing, for the protagonist suffers a series of negative experiences that would later develop into psychological conflicts. One of the first revelations about the main character's difficult past appears when the group had already started to look for the protagonist's father in the forest, when she suddenly starts to talk about a previous experience with her 'former husband': "He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll

never trust that word again" (Atwood 1998:47). In this fragment she allows the reader to discover that this relationship has ended in negative terms and as a consequence, she has become colder and distrustful. After this failed relationship, the protagonist proves unable to establish meaningful connections with other people. This is distinctly seen in how she feels about others; especially about Joe, her current boyfriend. For instance, when she describes her first meeting with Joe she mentions that what he liked about her was that she acted "as if I were feeling no emotion. But I really wasn't" (ibid.p.28). She also explains that she does not really love him, even though she wants to "it would be nice if he meant something more to me […], no one has since my husband" (ibid.p.42), confirming the idea that her past relationship affected her capacity to build social and emotional connections. Another example of her coldness appears much later, after she rejects Joe's proposal of marriage. The protagonist confesses that she does not feel bad about it; in fact, she does not feel anything at all: This emotional detachment is reflected from the very beginning on the way she talks about herself, for which purpose she often uses words like "dead", "frozen", and "numb".

Therefore, the two main wounds or initial shocks that the protagonist underwent are: first, her failed relationship with a married man that made her feel afraid of being emotionally hurt again (hence her reluctance to open up to others); and second, the forced abortion of her first baby. This situation led her to a state of mental instability that marked the beginning of her process of individuation.

She hid them in her own unconscious under false memories and anecdotes that eventually became the only version of her life she recognized. She herself suspects that there is something wrong about this invented version of her life, but cannot discern what the problem is: "I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said" (ibid.p.73). This estrangement from her own past leaves the protagonist's life divided into two: the before and the after, and since she has rejected her own past, half of herself has been erased. As a consequence of this unconscious decision, the protagonist feels divided. She is not sure about why, but throughout the novel the main character expresses her concern about not feeling complete, portraying herself as a divided self. She continuously makes reference to something she calls "the missing part of me", which stands for her past self.

Probably, the main reason behind this division is her forced abortion. It was the culmination of her failed relationship as well as the physical representation of a separation inside herself: "I'd allowed myself to be cut into two. […] The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb" (ibid.p.108). The abortion marked the end of the relationship and of the life she knew. It is important to notice that she has identified herself with "the wrong half" of herself. The part she is looking for is her old self, the one that knew how to feel alive. She is now nothing more like the carcass of the person she was. She is an individual that has been fragmented –wounded– by a series of negative experiences she does not know how to overcome. From this point on, the protagonist will start to reflect on her mental conflicts more and more, resulting in a journey of self-discovery that will develop into her personal process of individuation.

Quest in Nature

The journey to individuation of Surfacing's central character takes place in the Canadian wilderness. When the protagonist decides to come back to her old city, it is not only her father who is missing, but also her own identity. By coming home she is searching for her origins; a clue that can take her back to her old self. In this sense, the setting in which this quest takes place is key, especially in the case of Canadian writings. According to Hammill, in Canadian literature the wilderness is conceived in two main different ways: "the first group, which represents nature as hostile and treacherous […].In the second group the natural environment is the site of authenticity, provides healing, escape and self-knowledge, and may also teach humans about their kinship with animals" (2007:64). In Surfacing the Canadian wilderness clearly represents the second option. Even though nature is sometimes depicted as dangerous, it is the place in which the protagonist is able to reconnect with her old self. The wilderness is presented in this novel as a tool for introspection and self-discovery.

During the course of her journey, the narrator becomes very much aware of the presence of nature as a living force. Her shattered mind as a result of losses has now healed as she passes through trauma with the magical help of nature and unification with it: "The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground" (Atwood 1998: 187). As she becomes part of nature, she uses her own language to express herself; as she is nature and animals are words, she is words, too. From then on, she communicates with others in a new way: "As she merges with nature, she resists the rules of syntax and punctuation. She no longer regards language as necessary to being" (Petrilli 2007: 47). Therefore, in relation to nature, she does not feel any need to use rational discourse to communicate. She intends to use the language of nature because it is "one of the languages there are no nouns, only verbs held for a longer moment" (Atwood 1998: 32). She learns how to use the language of nature rather than any symbolic language which has lost its meaning for her. As Ward argues the narrator's "metamorphosis into a language less being allows her passage into another world where she hopes to find another language that will guide her to some kind of truth" (2007: 49). As she uses the language of nature, she feels so secure within nature because as part of nature, nothing can harm her anymore:

"if I go into the swamp, among the dead tree roots, I'll be safe, they'd have to wade for me, the mud is soft, they'll sink like bulldozers" (Atwood 1998: 191).

The more she interacts with nature, the more she comes to terms with her feelings and grief. She not only returns to reality but also gets rid of her feelings of emptiness. Unlike before, when she was unable to feel anything, now she has feelings of sorrow for her deceitful husband. Besides, she perceives that her unwanted abortion led her to refute her ability to "negotiate within rational discourse successfully" (Petrilli 2007: 78). She feels her "feeling was beginning to seep back into" her, she is "tangled like a foot that's been asleep" (Atwood 1998: 171). Her numb body becomes responsive as a result of her relation to nature, and now she feels her own desires, sorrows and satisfaction and gets rid of her emotionally numb condition: "I can remember him, fake husband, more clearly, though, and now I feel nothing for him but sorrow" (Atwood 1998: 195).

She dives into the lake and feels it very much alive: "I go off the dock and wade in from the shore, slowly, splashing water over my shoulders and neck, the cold climbing my thighs, my foot soles feel the sand and twigs and suck leaves" (Atwood 1998: 72). She joins with nature and separates herself from her companion. She perceives that human and nature have an interrelationship because human's behavior toward nature is akin to living with other humans. From this epiphany onward, the narrator is a changed person. Unlike the previous episode of fishing when the narrator killed the fish senselessly, the narrator now refuses to kill fish as she considers herself part of nature. Kristeva states that women belong to cyclic time, men to linear time; women with their monthly periods and pregnancies belong to the world of nature, the changing of seasons. By going into the woods, and diving into the lake, the protagonist enters cyclic time, and is at one with nature. She says: "I enter my own time" (191). Kristeva states that women always feel the pain of separation from the mother. The desire to return to the womb is expressed in the book symbolically by the protagonist's dive into the lake.

In Jungian archetypes, lake can also be conceived as water. Water possesses a wide range of interpretations; however, "the symbolic meanings of water may be reduced to three main areas. It is a source of life, a vehicle of cleansing and a center of regeneration" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996:1081). These three meanings fit within the idea of Surfacing as a process of individuation, as it involves rebirth or renovation. Nevertheless, a lake is not just plain water, there is another aspect attached to it: depth and lack of transparency. These characteristics imply that we cannot see the whole picture of the lake, only the surface. What is in the depths is hidden from knowledge until we explore it. This way "the depths themselves […] become a symbol of the unconscious" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1089), of the unknown. wilderness books [like Surfacing] frequently contain a mirror scene – a scene in which the woman looks in the mirror and sees that she has been altered" (Atwood 2004: 130). In fact, there The main character has then entered the lake –the door of the unconscious (she herself acknowledges that "the lake was an entrance for me" (Atwood 1998:147) – and has found what her mind hides. This event means that the second step of the process of individuation has been accomplished: she has established contact with her own unconscious. Hereafter, the conscious and unconscious part of her Self are put closer together, even though the division has not been completely fixed. The protagonist mentions this development making reference to "the half of me that had begun to return" (ibid.p.148). Part of her repressed memories has become conscious.

After the immersion, the protagonist changes her attitude and turns the forest into a positive element: it is not the forest that is dangerous; it is the human beings. This change can be understood as a consequence of the wounding she suffered. She was afraid of what her unconscious contained until she realized that the suffering that provoked this situation was originated by a human action. For this reason, the protagonist starts to establish a strong connection with Canadian nature as a shelter against human cruelty.

As a consequence, the main character rejects her human nature, since she feels it makes her an accomplice of human wickedness. Instead, she embraces animal life and stops identifying as a human being. Displaying features of this animal behavior, one night she decides to have sex with Joe in the forest, but with the only purpose to get pregnant, for "pleasure is redundant, the animals don't have pleasure" (ibid.p.161). After this event, she recovers and accepts the memory of her lost child; the emptiness that was inside her (due to her abortion) has been filled: "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been imprisoned for so long […].The two halves clasp" (ibid.p.162). These 'two halves' make reference to her conscious and her unconscious – her present and her past. They have been united through the acknowledgement of her most hurtful wounding. Now that this memory has "risen from the lake" and emerged from the unconscious, she is no longer divided.

It should be noticed that, since the protagonist's division had already been fixed (symbolically speaking, when she had sex with Joe), the inability to feel emotions that she blamed on such fact does not exist anymore. Therefore, faced with the frustration of having to accept the death of her parents, she proves capable to cry: "I'm crying finally, it' the first time, I watch myself doing it" (ibid.p.172). This is a symptom that shows the protagonist is approaching wholeness.

In order to connect with the spirits of her parents, she concludes it is necessary for her to reject every human-made element and live in close contact with the forest. "They can't be anywhere that's marked out, enclosed" (ibid.p.180) is the rule she lives by. From a psychoanalytical perspective this makes sense. The person needs to disregard the elements that link her with her conscious life in order to be able to fully explore her own unconscious. The individuation process is almost over. The protagonist has entered her unconscious and faced the personified complexes

that inhabited it. As a result, she has been able to completely accept the memories her unconscious was hiding, thus recovering her past, her "lost half".

Finally, she prepares herself to go back to the village: "I dress, clumsily, unfamiliar with buttons; I re-ender my own time" (ibid.p.191). she is able to communicate with others through language, and she is satisfied that she has "words that can be understood" (ibid. p. 196). She decides to leave wilderness and return back to city as she is able to accept the imperfections in the world and she perceives that she cannot withdraw into isolation. She has re-entered the realm of language, dealt with her traumas, and achieved a unified self. Psychoanalytically, what is happening in this last part of the book is that the protagonist is slowly coming back to external reality. Nevertheless, to do so she will need to cross the door of the unconscious again –the one that brought her to her past – in order to go back to the village, which she herself identifies with "the present tense" (ibid.p.51).

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood in surfacing drives the protagonist to gain an optimistic overview in her spiritual journey of assessment of her existence in life. The unnamed narrator suffers from loss; therefore she cannot use language to articulate her losses. Her psyche is shattered in to many pieces as she has lost part of herself through her abortion, divorce, and parent's deaths. However with the help of nature and her experiences in it, she learns how to deal with her repressed memories and unresolved grief and come to terms with them. Thus she acquires the language of nature to communicate and express her sense of loss. Finally, instead of a fragmented self, she gains an integrated personality and reaches wholeness. As Jung indicates, she regained her wish for a pursuit of her life, signifying the emergence of a state of a rebirth and regeneration in her spiritual world. The nature is the reason for her awakening.

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