

## The Anatomy of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing

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THE protagonist in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* seeks, in the northland wilderness of her childhood, some mythic illumination through which she might establish peace with both her previous existence and her present one. The unnamed narrator in that novel would also return to her past in the hope that the child she had once been might have a message that bears on the desperate, self-deceived life she now leads. In other words, her journey to her former home ostensibly to look for her missing father is really a barely rational excursion into the uncharted territory of her own psyche and a search for her authentic self, for the "true vision" that comes "at the end, after the failure of logic."<sup>1</sup> However, even though the protagonist in *Surfacing* undergoes an enlightening *rite de passage*, she must ultimately settle for something less. In the Quebec wilderness, at last initiated into her own identity, she can cast off the demeaning stereotypes her society imposes on a young woman. But when she returns to her Ontario city must she take on a false identity again? Certainly, she cannot continue to operate in the realm of the mythic but must somehow transcend transcendence.

In essence, we are arguing that *Surfacing*, a self-consciously mythic novel, has a conclusion that is almost anti-mythic. More specifically, Atwood's ending serves as a modification of and addendum to one of the archetypal mythic patterns so persuasively assessed by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*. In this seminal study of *mythoi* or generic plots, Frye maintains that "the complete form of the romance [the mythos of summer] is clearly the successful

quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle . . . ; and the exaltation of the hero."<sup>2</sup> As we shall subsequently demonstrate, the narrator of *Surfacing*, during the course of her quest adventure, passes through precisely these three stages. Yet Atwood's surfacer cannot complete her adventure with Frye's third and final stage, what he terms "the *anagnorisis* or discovery, the recognition of the hero, who has clearly proved himself to be a hero even if he does not survive the conflict."<sup>3</sup> Precisely because this *anagnorisis* is a public recognition, a general "exaltation of the hero," the protagonist of *Surfacing* must come up with something different. Expecting "exaltation" back in the city, she would not be judged heroic but deemed mad.<sup>4</sup> For the contemporary female hero, continuing survival demands disguise and some descent from the triumph achieved by successfully completing a mythic quest.

A traditional quest set in the modern world might itself seem somewhat suspect. As Frye points out, not only do his basic modes of comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony or satire correspond to the four seasons of the turning year, but Western literature has also run through its own temporal cycle from the comedy of a medieval cultural spring to the satire and irony that give expression to the winter of our current age's discontent. In effect, "we are now in an ironic phase of literature."<sup>5</sup> The reader therefore is almost of necessity conditioned to suspect that a modern mythic work must be ironic, something in the nature of John Barth's parodic *Chimera*. Indeed, Frye sees irony as "a parody of romance" and observes that "the central principle of ironic myth" entails "the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content which fits them in unexpected ways."<sup>6</sup> But the reader of *Surfacing* soon discovers that the central myth of that novel is not subverted by its contemporary context. Quite the opposite occurs. Portraying such crucial events as the narrator's final vision of her dead parents, Atwood must abandon the low mimetic mode of realistic

fiction. In short, *Surfacing* is a romance in the high old style. And in a romance, Frye observes, "the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended."<sup>7</sup>

So Atwood has set herself a task that is both formalistically and ideologically difficult. She uses an old, archetypal form and the ancient quest motif but does so in order to explore distinctly contemporary questions. How does one find an identity in an isolating, alienating world? How does a woman prevent herself from being or becoming merely the shining surface that serves to reflect her society's views of what she should be — accomodating, subservient, identity-less? Such questions become increasingly pertinent as the narrator's search for her lost father becomes a search for her own true self, as a missing person detective mystery devolves into a quest of epic proportions.

The first stage of this quest, what Frye calls "the *agon* or conflict" (the "perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures"), should serve to delimit the issues around which the "*pathos* or death struggle" will center. Atwood, however, begins her "romance" on a most "unromantic" note. A daughter in search of a lost father is seemingly after the stability of an ordered old world, not the promise of a brave new one. Yet the gradually revealed character of that missing father soon demonstrates that he embodies no established ideal. To start with, in a world at war, a man who models himself after Locke and other eighteenth-century rationalists is simply an anachronism. Furthermore, the small and rational world in which her father wished to raise his family was a carefully sustained fiction, an incongruity in the larger world of the northern Quebec wilderness. And neither is her father a Fisher King whose deliverance might bring fertility to a wasteland. He had already sold out to the wasteland. Surveying land and marking trees for the timber companies was hardly a way to preserve his own little island of sanity against the encroaching industrial world, against the "Americans", to use his daughter's term.

These are insights that the daughter only gradually achieves. But all along there are hints that her task has more dimensions than she originally anticipated — that she, for example, should *see* her father for what he was instead of merely looking for him. In fact, the first indication of the real *agon* in *Surfacing* is the narrator's regular suspicion that there is more to her situation and surroundings than meets her eye. Thus, while her companions seek disconnected, meaningless manifestations of the quaint or ridiculous (material for the artless movie, *Random Samples*, that they are making with their rented equipment), she watches for portents, for signs. They can find a sight such as the bottle house to be a mere curiosity, whereas for her it becomes an almost symbolic portal into her past, "a preposterous monument to some quirkish person exiled or perhaps a voluntary recluse like my father" (p. 11). Similarly, the early encountered moose family is more than just a travesty of a service station tourist attraction. "Father moose," "mother moose," and "a little boy moose," are together near the gasoline pumps, while a "little girl moose in a frilly skirt and a pigtailed blonde wig, holding a red parasol in one hoof" is up on the roof of the service station (p. 13). That distribution of stuffed moose is an obvious image of the narrator's own family status — the daughter separated from father, mother and brother — as well as a hint of a plunge to come.

Equally suggestive of things to come is the road itself, the objective manifestation of a more perilous inner journey. There is first the two-sided welcome sign, "BIENVENUE on one side and WELCOME on the other" (p. 11), but both words ominously underscored with bullet holes. That sign is a correlative of the narrator's own fearful ambivalence: "Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory. My throat constricts . . ." (p. 11). Then, soon after she and her three travelling companions have entered Quebec province, she discovers that the narrow twisting highway she travelled as a child has been replaced by a more modern one. The old "way is blocked" (p. 12), yet it still remains as another indication of

the "disease" of progress that is "spreading up from the south" (p. 7). Furthermore, as a child, returning home on the old road, the narrator was always car sick. The new road precludes that ordeal, and she misses it: "They've cheated, we're here too soon and I feel deprived of something, as though I can't really get here unless I've suffered; as though the first view of the lake, which we can see now, blue and cool as redemption, should be through tears and a haze of vomit" (p. 15).

The hardships of a rough winding drive have been removed. But what were physical difficulties for the child have been superseded by psychological problems for the adult. In fact, the very fashion in which the narrator longs for the former manageable single physical trial of a car ride with a definite end suggests how different her present crisis is — manifold, subjective, psychically overwhelming, and quite open ended. No wonder she laments all change. Like her father, she wants to preserve a myth of a pristine wilderness, even though the surveyors, the powerboats, the discarded cans and bottles of civilization are everywhere.

A longing for an unsullied world parallels a more desperate and much more private dream. The story of the protagonist's marriage, child, and divorce disguises (negates) the fact of her abortion — an adulteration of her body that corresponds to the adulteration of the native woods in which she was born and raised. It is especially that private "violation" with which she must "come to terms" but which she will not admit.<sup>8</sup> Yet, because the two desecrations are symbolically related, the return to one past sets the stage for a return to another one. After she witnesses what has been done to her native land, the protagonist also comes to see that the abortion had "planted death" in her "like a seed" and that her fantasy marriage was merely a way of "layering it over," making that seed "a cyst, a tumor" (pp. 144-45). As earlier suggested, the *agon* in Atwood's romance is not any physical danger on the narrator's way. It is the possibility that by travelling that

way, by returning to her past, she can begin to recognize the consequences of a cystic seed, the malignant growth of self-doubts and self-delusions that are surfacing in every aspect of her life.

The journey by car is only the beginning of the narrator's search for what she later calls the "evil grail" (p. 143). The second basic stage of her quest, the "*pathos* or death struggle," comes after she has driven through civilization's wasteland world — successive flimsy tourist towns, the pit where the Americans installed their rockets — to a wilderness that is being rapidly wasted.<sup>9</sup> Just as the *agon* appropriately takes place mostly on the road, the *pathos* occurs largely on the island. As Frye observes, the "most common" setting for "the point of epiphany," the site where the *pathos* ends in a mystical illumination that harmonizes "the undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature," is a symbolically significant location such as a mountain top, an island, a tower.<sup>10</sup> On her island, returned to her childhood home, the narrator is seemingly somewhat isolated from the more perturbing aspects of her present world. She can attend to the immediate task of looking for her missing father. Yet that initial search is not the *pathos* of her quest any more than the drive itself was the *agon*.

When two days on the island demonstrate that her father is not to be found, the narrator is ready to depart. Her two male companions, however, decide that they will all extend their vacation for another week, which provides the protagonist with a new task. Instead of continuing to look for her father, she now wants to avoid any encounter: "I wanted to get them off the island, to protect them from him, to protect him from them" (p. 83). She fantasizes that her father is possibly watching them, probably mad. But she is primarily motivated by a growing sense that her friends should not have accompanied her. Even during the drive she had felt that "either the three of them are in the wrong place or I am" (p. 8). Soon it becomes clear who is in the wrong place, literally and figuratively. The narrator sees that the other three — her

married friends, David and Anna, and her own lover, Joe — have brought with them to what should be an island refuge the very tendencies and forces that render the larger world, for her, appalling.<sup>11</sup> Atwood thereby suggests that the *pathos* in her protagonist's quest is that character's dawning recognition that she must struggle to defend and define herself even against her friends.

Her realization begins with a thematically important recognition scene, the encounter, while portaging in to fish on another lake, with a hung heron and the two "Americans" who killed it. Coming upon the slain bird, the narrator at once sees that there is a logic to senseless brutality. The deed itself serves "to prove that [the perpetrators] could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise [the bird] was valueless: beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it . . . It must have been the Americans; they were in there now, we would meet them" (pp. 116-17). Soon the "astronaut finish" of the two Americans proclaims what they are as much as did the dead heron: "the faces impermeable as space-suit helmets, sniper eyes, they did it; guilt glittered on them like tinfoil" (p. 121). Yet the "Americans" also judge by surfaces, take the new arrivals for Americans, and ask them from where in the United States they come. They all thereby discover that they are all Canadians. For the narrator, though, nothing has changed: "But they'd killed the heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into" (p. 129).

With that insight, she can better "place" both David and Joe. They, too, in her sense of the word, are "Americans," automatons seeking the conquests and trophies that might be badges of their own existence. Therein lies her danger and, as earlier suggested, the *pathos* of her quest. She can gain no victory for herself if she becomes merely the token of another's triumph. David especially would render the

protagonist into something little better than the heron, the ocular proof of his victory, of his potency, even though that potency is only a pathetic pretense at exercising power. When the complex game of sexual put-downs that he inflicts on his wife gets out of hand and she makes love with Joe, he demands, "tit for tat." The narrator knows that his proposition is not prompted by even the vaguest desire for her as a person: "Geometrical sex, he needed me for an abstract principle; it would be enough for him if our genitals could be detached like two kitchen appliances and copulate in mid-air, that would complete his equation" (p. 152). After she refuses to be reduced to a copulating genital, he turns on her violently: "you tight-ass bitch . . . I'm not going to sit up and beg for a little third-rate cold tail" (p. 152). That reaction enables the narrator to "see into him," to recognize that "He was an imposter, a pastiche," with "second-hand American . . . spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen" (p. 152).

Joe also turns against her. Because he did not talk much, because he was furry like the animals, she had seen him as honest, direct, animal-like. But he also becomes an antagonist she must resist. With Joe, too, sexuality is at issue. His proposal, like David's proposition, constitutes an immediate demand and also serves as a metaphor for a more pervasive desire to dominate and control. He wants to marry her. She is reluctant, but to "prove her love" she should comply with his wish: "Prove your love, they say. You really want to marry me, let me fuck you instead. You really want to fuck, let me marry you instead. As long as there's a victory, some flag I can wave, parade I can have in my head" (p. 87). Even Anna, like both men, has a private parade in which she thinks her friend should march. Desperate to preserve a failing marriage, this wife accedes to her husband's arbitrary rules and sexually demeaning comments and actions. Yet when she is told that the narrator refused David, a refusal partly prompted by concern for the wife, Anna is offended. Because her own "compulsive need to conform to male



expectations," as Gloria Onley notes, "fills her with unconscious self-loathing," Anna must condemn her friend for being different.<sup>12</sup>

Joe silently, Anna and David verbally, they all three turn on the narrator, who sees that she is being judged: "A ring of eyes, tribunal; in a minute they would join hands and dance around me, and after that the rope and the pyre, cure for heresy" (p. 154). The execution that she anticipates is an obvious exaggeration but the verdict is not. She is guilty of the heresy of failing to think and act according to the dictates of others. They cannot tolerate that and try to negate her identity. She is charged with hating men, with wanting to be a man, with not being a "real" woman. "God, she really is inhuman," Anna concludes. As she is thus excluded from their "human" circle a long term process comes into sharp focus. All her life the narrator has been pressured to become a proper woman, proper to be determined by others. For example, the first of the childhood scrapbooks which she examines, looking for where she "had come from or gone wrong" (p. 91), is filled with mostly "illustrations cut from magazines" of ladies in different poses or dresses — images of the surface she should acquire. She has now seen, with only her "friends" and isolated on her island, how pervasive are the forces that would turn her into the "right" kind of hollow vessel. The second stage, the struggle or *pathos*, is nearing its completion.

Frye observes that romances generally assume a "dialectic structure." The questor meets other characters along the way who fall, basically, into two simple categories: good and evil, those who obstruct and those who aid. Individuals who hinder the quest are "caricatured as simply villainous or cowardly."<sup>18</sup> It is not therefore surprising that the narrator's companions all increasingly take on the qualities of caricature — a stereotypical "dumb blonde," a parody of the "good liberal" of the sixties, a "paralyzed artist" whose art lies in mangling his pots. Atwood has been criticized for thus simplifying her subordinate characters, and yet, because of the mythic (high mimetic) structure of the novel, this flattening should be expected. The narrator must come to see these others as

enemies — as “second-hand Americans” and victimizers despite their pretense of being the victimized female or the victimized Canadian — before she can reach the third stage of her journey. She will see them once again as simply human, neither angels nor demons, in the fourth and de-mythifying stage.<sup>14</sup>

Before the surfer can come to any kind of relativistic conclusion, however, she must pass through the third stage of *anagnorisis* or enlightenment. Typically, that process entails various supra-natural phenomena including a descent into the underworld. Indeed, in this section of the novel, we enter a projected world, one in which “reality” reflects the narrator’s psychic needs. Thus the presence of ghosts and the possibility of visions.<sup>15</sup> There are suddenly “rules” of seemingly divine origin that are incomprehensible by any normal human standards. The protagonist must continually feel her way, attempting to discern the superhuman (or subhuman) logic behind these intuited taboos. Yet gradually she realizes that just as her search has been a search for herself, so too, in best mythic fashion, she almost must embody the grail that will be the proof of her success.

The third stage of Atwood’s romance begins when the narrator discovers her father’s dead body. In a very real sense, she can then release herself from her father — from his logic, his concept of an ordered universe, and even from her suspicion that his rationalism has given way, in the immediate past, to an insanity which may have always been present in his obsessive retreat from the rest of the world. More to the point, she can begin to re-discover herself only after she has become, both literally and symbolically, an orphan.

The immediate consequence of the narrator’s dawning recognition of her essential “aloneness,” of her independence, is her decision to make love again with Joe — but this time on her terms. Earlier, she had forestalled his crudely physical advances by claiming that she would get pregnant. But now, when she draws him out into the night to make love under

the stars, fertility is her sole object: "I love you," he says into the side of my neck, catechism. Teeth grinding, he's holding back, he wants to be like the city, baroque scrollwork, intricate as a computer, but I'm impatient, pleasure is redundant, the animals don't have pleasure. I guide him into me, it's the right season, I hurry." As "he trembles," she continues, "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been imprisoned for so long" (pp. 161-62).

In this passage, Atwood stresses the connection between the lost father and the lost child. The drowned father, with his camera cord around his neck, had resembled a fetus strangled by its umbilical cord. The narrator must dive down into the lake to find the dead father before she can surface to the admission that she has no child. Metaphorically, she can recover her dead child only after she discovers her dead father — both in the "redemptive" lake. Furthermore, the metaphor of the fetus-like father closes a symbolic circle. Re-emerging from the lake (a classic female symbol), the daughter has figuratively become her father's mother ready to conceive herself. No wonder she can surface with a new concept of fecundity. Her psychic journey back into her past has allowed her to discover herself and to find within herself something worth perpetuating. She is nearing the end of her mythic journey.

The third stage of her heroic quest concludes with the protagonist, alone on her island, fully achieving her *anagnorisis*. Earlier she had made a token sacrifice of a sweatshirt to the "unacknowledged or forgotten" gods of the land. Now they demand everything that pertains to her old, false social life. By surrendering everything she becomes free to be a natural woman totally at one with nature: "I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning" (p. 181). Guided by unseen forces that transcend time, she runs naked through the woods. She encounters her mother, a female Saint Francis figure who, feeding the birds, is also in perfect harmony with nature. She encounters her father, the wolf-like creature you turn into when you've been too long in the wilderness, and

recognizes that she is him too: "I place my feet in [his tracks] and find that they are my own" (p. 187). So both visions image different aspects of her own state. These emblems are also confirmed by the symbolic drawings she created as a child. In fact, her drawings and the Indian cliff paintings are strikingly similar and prompt her to realize how much her own origins go back to pre-history, how her own psychic truths are engraved in the rocks of her native land. That understanding, of course, cannot be rational. Nevertheless, it allows Atwood to fashion a comprehensible ending for the novel, one that begins to tie together the complex strands of the narrator-protagonist's life. We note how the narrator comes to reject human definition; we see her move briefly beyond humanity; and then we observe how she realizes that she must descend back into the world, must surface from the mythic in order to survive.

When the narrator runs naked through the woods, her hair a tangle, her fingernails caked with mud, a "new kind of centerfold" (p. 190), she briefly destroys the only identity she has ever been allowed by her society. She is the antithesis of Anna; the antithesis of the traditional heroine, the captive maiden waiting for the rescuing knight. But no new role is provided. Although briefly governed by supernatural forces, she cannot achieve the supernatural by being metamorphosed, as she anticipates, into some animal god. Alone on the island, without protection, she would freeze. Part of her revelation is the revelation of death — the death of parents, the cycle of life and death. She is certain that she bears within herself a new life. That life cannot thrive if she chooses to remain alone in the wilderness. She must reject the paradigm of both her father and mother and return to the city, to all that her mythic quest has just led her to abandon. Yet she can do so with a new inner strength. She has vanquished the lies that have dominated her life and has relinquished her previous false myths, presumably permanently. She has also seen that what she has learned must be protected, fostered, but partly hidden when she returns to society.

It is at this point that Atwood's novel departs from the archetypal romance pattern described by Frye, or, rather, begins to transcend the mythic to accommodate the mundane. Frye's categories, like myths of old, simply do not allow for women heroes.<sup>16</sup> In the standard romances, female characters play secondary roles. Polarized into the virtuous maiden or the evil temptress, they mostly help or hinder the male protagonist. The first can point the hero on his way; the second tries to turn him from it. But mostly maidens serve as prizes. As Frye dryly observes, "the reward of the quest usually is or includes a bride."<sup>17</sup> To be just a bride, of course, is to be defined by someone else. It is to exist *for* the hero, not *as* the hero. In both the old myths and the modern society, there is therefore a definite place for an Anna, but not for a female mythic hero.

If Frye's formulations do not fully accommodate the protagonist in *Surfacing*, Atwood elsewhere provides a category that does. Victimization, she argues in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, can end with the fourth Basic Victim Position: "to be a creative non-victim" who is "able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others' versions of it."<sup>18</sup> Of course, as Atwood admits, this is not a Victim Position at all: "In Position Four, Victor/ Victim games are obsolete. You don't even have to concentrate on rejecting the role of Victim [or spiritual guide or temptress or bride] because the role is no longer a temptation for you."<sup>19</sup> In fact, the very term "creative non-victim" suggests both a de-elevation from the category of "hero," one whose heroism is proved by his triumph over others, and an ascendance from the more typically female (and Canadian, Atwood insists) role of being triumphed over by others. In a different sense than Frye, Atwood resolves her work on a middle ground.<sup>20</sup> The narrator knows that to remain naked in the woods, heroically free "from all falsely defining images of herself" and, in Onley's memorable phrase, "a microcosm of the biosphere," would also mean physical annihilation.<sup>21</sup> Unsung heroes serve no useful function, mythic or otherwise. Moreover, if psychic

insight and spiritual heroism can be won only at the cost of physical annihilation, the victory is Pyrrhic indeed. Yet the alternative, to return to the city and society, seems to negate the triumph, the epiphany, the female protagonist has achieved.

The narrator, at the end of *Surfacing*, is presented with two alternatives. She can stay on her island. Or she can leave. The setting reflects that simple choice. "The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing" (p. 192). Nature asks nothing because, finally, it gives nothing. As all mythic heroes must eventually learn, nature takes little account of the most heroic of human deeds: *ubi sunt*. The protagonist really has only one viable course. She will return with Joe who stands, like Charon, ready to usher her back to the other world — in some ways, with imperfect relationships and predictable failures, the real nether world: "If I go with him we will have to talk . . . we can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other, the way it was before, we will have to begin. For us it's necessary, the intercession of words; and we will probably fail, sooner or later, more or less painfully. That's normal . . ." (p. 192).

Still, considering what the heroine has gone through in the course of her novel, her "surfacing," there is something heroic in this return to normality. Although at the end of the book she remains poised on the dock "which is neither land nor water," we must see that this is not a typical contemporary ambiguous conclusion. If the ending is uncertain it is because the protagonist, who has confronted and solved the riddles that she set herself, has no society in which to report back her success. Even more obviously, no society will be saved by her success. She is the Fisher King without a kingdom. She is, of course, also her own grail/knight, for she has rescued herself by recovering her real grail. And here we must emphasize that this grail is the second fetus.<sup>22</sup> The narrator's desire to bear a baby (significantly referred to as a genderless "it") indicates her awareness that, although there may be no place for her — as a female hero — in her society, she does now possess the knowledge that will help her child move along its own "untravelling paths."

A woman who returns to Ontario obviously in a state of mythic and mystical enlightenment would not, as earlier observed, elicit universal acclaim. So the woman returns pregnant. She will have a baby, which should provide her with a conventional enough occupation. In *Survival*, Atwood herself has observed that Canadian authors regularly bring in "the Baby Ex Machina" at "the end of the book to solve problems for the characters which they obviously can't solve for themselves."<sup>23</sup> In *Surfacing*, however, that often forced plotting device is made to serve several legitimate functions. To start with, as Roberta Rubenstein notes, "the narrator's spiritual malaise" was partly "a product of her separation" from both "the future (the unborn child)" and "the past (her dead parents)."<sup>24</sup> But in the final chapter, the protagonist convincingly asserts, "I re-enter my own time" (p. 191). She has recovered her parents and reconceived her child. She thereby achieves a different order of time than the one she previously suffered in that she can now acknowledge her past, anticipate her future. In fact, only by descending to the role of expectant mother does she fully achieve Frye's "cyclical world of nature." Pregnant, she embodies the picture of herself as a fetus she had drawn as a young girl. When she recognizes that that picture, a gift to her mother, has become her mother's gift to her, she has reconciled birth and death; her past and her present; the infant she was, the infant she aborted, and the infant she will bear.

The breach in time is not the only one that is bridged by a prospective baby. As Catherine McLay observes, "the child heals the division in the mother between the self and the world, mind and body."<sup>25</sup> But equally important, the child also provides a needed break. It is and enforces an end to the narrator's mythic quest: "I assume it: if I die it dies . . . It might be the first one, the first true human; it must be born, allowed" (p. 191). She will henceforth "refuse to be a victim"; she will "give up" the "lie" that she "is powerless," for "withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death." The old "games" are over and new ones, such as a different relationship with Joe or her own style of

motherhood, will "have to be invented" in the quotidian world (p. 191). Essentially, the fetus within her finally attests that she must now struggle to survive *in society*, not just on the perilous journey and through a *pathos* elsewhere — a continuing hazard never envisioned by knights of old.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 145. Subsequent references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text.
- <sup>2</sup>Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 187.
- <sup>3</sup>Frye, p. 187.
- <sup>4</sup>Her illumination can too easily be seen as an excursion into insanity. Thus Gloria Onley, in "Margaret Atwood: Surfacing in the Interests of Survival," *West Coast Review*, 7, No. 3 (1973), 52, writes that the protagonist in *Surfacing* "is clearly intended to be a representative schizophrenic" who "approaches and returns from the verge of madness."
- <sup>5</sup>Frye, p. 46.
- <sup>6</sup>Frye, p. 223.
- <sup>7</sup>Frye, p. 33.
- <sup>8</sup>The parallel between the two "violations" is drawn by Carol P. Christ, who, in "Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision," *Signs*, 2 (1976), 320, observes: "Unable to come to terms with [her first lover's] violation of herself and her body, [the narrator] focuses her attention on the violation of the Canadian wilderness by the men she calls 'Americans.'"
- <sup>9</sup>As Carole Gerson, in "Margaret Atwood and Quebec: A Footnote on *Surfacing*," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 1 (1976), 118-19, notes: "Wherever she looks, the narrator finds signs that her childhood version of Quebec is being violated by Americans and Canadians who have assimilated the American values of material progress and self-centered ecological destruction."
- <sup>10</sup>Frye, p. 203.
- <sup>11</sup>Annis Pratt, "Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and the Rebirth Journey," Margaret Atwood Special Session, MLA Convention, Chicago, 29 Dec. 1977, aptly observes that "the hero brings her own patriarchal space or subconscious gender world with her in the form of David and Anna, a couple hideously involved in normative 'male' and 'female' behaviour" (p. 16, typescript). This observation is part of a most illuminating modified Jungian reading of *Surfacing* and at a number of points parallels our reading. See also Annis Pratt, "Women and Nature in Modern Fiction," *Contemporary Literature*, 13 (1972), 476-90.



- <sup>12</sup>Gloria Onley, "Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle," *Canadian Literature*, No. 60 (1974), p. 28.
- <sup>13</sup>Frye, p. 195.
- <sup>14</sup>Catherine McLay, in "The Divided Self: Theme and Pattern in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 4, No. 1 (1975), 94-95, makes much the same point and observes that just as the narrator "comes to see others [including her first lover] no longer as the enemy but human too, fallible like herself," she also comes to see her parents as "no longer superhuman."
- <sup>15</sup>Atwood has suggested that the novel can be read as a ghost story of "the Henry James kind, in which the ghost that one sees is in fact a fragment of one's own self that has split off." See Graeme Gibson, "Margaret Atwood," in *Eleven Canadian Novelists Interviewed by Graeme Gibson* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 29.
- <sup>16</sup>It should be here emphasized that Atwood is not criticizing Frye himself. His schemata are most broadly descriptive, not prescriptive, but what they describe is a male-centered literature. As *Surfacing* shows, a mythic woman hero does not quite fit into the same pattern that will accommodate a male one.
- <sup>17</sup>Frye, p. 193.
- <sup>18</sup>Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), pp. 38-39.
- <sup>19</sup>Atwood, *Survival*, p. 39.
- <sup>20</sup>For Frye the middle ground is simply "our world," positioned between an "upper world" of a "mythical Messiah or deliverer" and "the demonic powers of a lower world" (*Anatomy*, p. 187, emphasis in the original). For Atwood, however, the resolution is more a harmonizing of earthly opposites: "the ideal would be somebody who would neither be a killer or a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world, which is a productive or creative harmony, rather than a destructive relationship towards the world" (on *Surfacing* in Gibson, p. 27).
- <sup>21</sup>Onley, "Power Politics," p. 38.
- <sup>22</sup>It should be noted that Atwood incorporates several references to the grail romance in *Surfacing*. For example, the narrator's employer is Mr. Percival. But that former grail knight has been metamorphosed into a cautious publisher of children's folk and fairy tales. Far from saving the protagonist, he merely provides her with further exercises in inauthenticity.
- <sup>23</sup>Atwood, *Survival*, p. 207.
- <sup>24</sup>Roberta Rubenstein, "Surfacing: Margaret Atwood's Journey to the Interior," *MFS*, 22 (1976), 395.
- <sup>25</sup>McLay, p. 93.