
The Narrator's Search for her Identity in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Keywords: Atwood, Surfacing, identity, search, narrator

Abstract

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is born on November 18, 1939, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. She received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and her master's degree from Radcliffe College.

Atwood is a Canadian writer best known for her novels, which include: *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Blind Assassin* (1998).

Atwood is a famous writer, and her novels are best sold all over the world. She has been labelled as a Canadian nationalist, feminist, and even a gothic writer. She is well known internationally in the USA, Europe, and Australia.

This research aims at showing throughout *Surfacing*, the way Atwood portrays the narrator as a woman searching for her own identity.

The narrator is considered a sympathetic and sensitive woman. Hilary Trapani states that:

Surfacing narrates the protagonist's search for her father, last seen at her childhood home on a remote island in the borderland between America and Canada. It is a narrative that combines elements of fairy tale, quest narrative and detective story together with an awareness of the limitations of any form of representation, including language, to capture a state referent. (14-15)

The narrator is uncomfortable by the changes that have taken place in her childhood hometown. She regrets for not bringing a map with her. "Now we're on my home ground foreign territory. My throat constricts as it learned to do when I discovered people could say words that would go into my ears meaning nothing" (*surf*, 4). She describes a childhood split between the city and the wilderness, and an affectless present. She fails to recognize the place, and longs for the nostalgic feeling but fails to get it.

Now I'm in the village,
walking through it, waiting for
the nostalgia to hit, for cluster
of nondescript buildings to be
irradiated with inner light like
a plug-in creche, as it has been
so often in memory, but
nothing happens (*surf*, 8).

During her visit to Paul's house or to the ice-cream parlor where she often used to go when she was a child, she is angry and lacks the power to bring everything according to how it was in the past. This makes her feel like crying and she feels that she doesn't belong to the place.

Nothing is the same; I don't know the way
any more. I slide my tongue around the
ice-cream, trying to concentrate on it, they
put sea weed in it now, but I'm starting to
shake, why is the road different, he
shouldn't have allowed them to do it. I
want to turn around and go back to the
city and never find out what happened to
him. I'll start crying, that would be
horrible, none of them would know what
to do and neither would I. I bite down into
the cone and I can't feel anything for a
minute but the knife-hard pain up the slide
of my face (*Surf*, 5).

Concerning the narrator's feeling Sutapa Roy claims that she "is introspective and contemplative about her feeling that leads her to examine her feeling of non-belongingness" (69). According to the narrator: "The feeling I expected before but failed to have comes now, homesickness, for a place where I never lived" (*Surf*, 18). The narrator represents her more real self-regaining her life story. The narrator feels

that her spiritual journey begins with her return to the Canadian wilderness. The search for her missing father reflects the search for her true identity. One day her father disappeared without a single clue to where he might have gone. She believes that "they must find it strange, a man his age staying alone the whole winter in a cabin ten miles from nowhere" (*Surf*, 38). Later, she gets angry and claims that:

All at once I am furious with him
for vanishing like this, unresolved,
leaving me with no answers to
give them when they ask. If he
was going to die he should have
done it visibly, out in the open, so
they could mark him with a stone
and get it over with (*Surf*, 38).

She finally reaches to a point where "it was no longer his death but my own that concerned me" (*Surf*, 76).

The image of God terrifies her, she is made to believe God is "a dead man in the sky watching everything" (*Surf*, 28). She dares to attend Sunday school when the school begins, she tries to fit in with other children, besides "to find out" (*Surf*, 35), by herself. She wants to discover God for herself and tells her brother: "Maybe I'll be a Catholic" (*Surf*, 36). Her brother answer's her with a generality that discourages her from observing for herself: "They believe if you don't go to mass you'll turn into a wolf" (*Surf*, 36). She has no opportunity to create her own idea of what God looks like. She generates a picture of "the alien god, mysterious to me [her] as ever" (*Surf*, 6). In her child's head she views Jesus as a creature that is "tired-looking, surely incapable of miracles" (*Surf*, 35). From her childhood on, her view on Christianity is rather negative (*Dudova*, 17).

A fair example of the narrator's tenderness of heart is when she had to release a frog to the lake. This makes her remember her brother who used to bottle frogs and she released them. This reflects her childhood activities, besides drawing rabbits with colored houses, and her brother drew war and death. (Endurance, Babae and Majeed, 36). She refers to her attachment with nature by stating that:

Slowly I retrace the trail. Something has
happened to my eyes, my feet are released
they alternate, several inches from the
ground. I'm ice-clear, transparent, my bones
and the child inside me showing through
the green webs of my flesh, the ribs are
shadows, the muscles jelly, the trees are
like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow
through the wood and bark. The forest leaps

upward, enormous, the way it was before they cut it, columns of sunlight frozen; the boulders float, melt, everything is made of water, even the rocks I break out again into bright sun and crumple, head against the ground. I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place (*Surf*, 131).

Another harmful example is the explosion at the lake by American's who come for fishing. The narrator feels she is now part of the environment, and she objects to killing the fish because she seems to have desisted harmful treatment of nature, and she goes on:

I couldn't any more, I had no right to. We didn't need it our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they call it these were no longer the right reasons (*Surf*, 86).

According to the narrator's relationship with her mother, she considers herself and her mother victims of a culture based on cold ratiocination.

she [the mother] hated hospitals and doctors; she must have been afraid they would experiment on her, keep her alive as long as they could with tubes and needles even though it was what they call terminal, in the head it always is, and in fact that's what they did (*Surf*, 11).

When the narrator returns to the cottage she hopes that her mother might have left her a message. She did not have a close relationship with her mother when she was a young child. Katie M. Moss states: "that Atwood's characters are often "haunted" by their mothers or mother replacement figures and they must become mothers themselves to fight this dividedness" (8). The narrator reflects on the coolness of her relationship with her mother when she was in the hospital dying. She states:

She [the mother] may not have known who I was: she didn't ask me why I left or where I'd been, though she might not have asked any way, feeling as she always had that

personal questions were rude. "I'm not going to your funeral", I said. I had to lean close to her, the hearing in one of her ears was gone. I wanted her to understand in advance, and approve. "I never enjoyed them". She said to me (*Surf*, 11).

Later the narrator admits:

We came to have faith in her ability to recover from anything; we ceased to take her illnesses seriously, they were only natural phases, like cocoons. When she died, I was disappointed in her. (*Surf*, 21) .

When her mother died she admits that she kept waiting for "word of some kind, not money but an object, a token" (*Surf*, 21). It is the discovery of her mother's leather jacket that reminds her that she must keep looking for this token from both her mother and father (*Moss*, 39).

The narrator is afraid to tell her parents about her divorce and abortion because she considered her parents to be:

They were from another age, prehistoric, when everyone got married and had a family, children growing in the yard like sunflowers; remote as Eskimoes or mastodons (*Surf*, 104).

She believes that her parents are so innocent that she doesn't have the courage to inform them. The narrator "also feels that she has to confront the events of her childhood in order to feel whole again" (*Bakay*, 3). She lies about her marriage, having a child, seeing her brother drown and other incidents in her life. The narrator claims:

It was all real enough, it was enough reality for ever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I need 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 (*Surf*, 103).

The narrator wished to find a personal note or a particular message in her mother's notebook, but, unfortunately, she finds only notes about the weather: "All she put in it was a record of the weather and the work done on that day: no reflections, no emotions" (*Surf*, 12). Her mother leaves her childhood scrapbooks, in which she narrates:

The picture was mine, I had made it.
The baby was myself before I was
born, the man was God ... That was
what the picture had meant then but
their first meaning was lost now like
the meaning of the rock paintings.
They were my guides, she had saved
them for me, pictographs. I had to read
their new meaning with the help of the
power (*Surf*, 114).

She also reflects on her mother's close relationship with nature: "On some days she would simply vanish, walk off by herself into the forest" (*Surf*, 33). Or elsewhere,

Standing beside the tray for the birds,
her [mother's] hand stretched out; the
jays were there too, she's training
them,
One is on her shoulder, peering at her
with clever thumbtack eyes, another is
landing on her wrist, wings caught as a
blur (*Surf*, 76).

The narrator pays special attention to the importance of time when she felt close to her mother, inside her womb when her brother had a terrible accident. She narrates:

My brother was under the water, face
upturned, eyes open and unconscious,
sinking gently; air was coming out of
his mouth. It was before I was born
but I can remember it as clearly as if I
saw it, and perhaps I did see it: I
believe that an unborn baby has its
eyes open and can look out through
the walls of the mother's stomach, like
a frog in a jar (*Surf*, 19).

The narrator loses her identity and sanity when she is forced to have an abortion and loses the child. The narrator suffers throughout the novel from a "state of amnesia in which she has suppressed the facts of her own life story" (White, in Bloom, 161).

Her relationship with her husband is defined as a political code:

After it was born I was no more use. I
couldn't prove it though, he was
clever: he kept saying he loved me
(*Surf*, 20).

She refers to her wedding by stating:

I could recall the exact smells, glue
and humid socks and the odour of
second-day blouse and crystalized
deodorant from the irriated secretary,
and, from another doorway, the chill
of antiseptic (*Surf*, 60).

She feels guilty about her abortion and wishes to die; she believes that she does not deserve to be alive. She states:

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 (*Surf*, 31).

According to David Staines the nameless narrator:

Wishes to be not human, because
being human inevitably involves being
guilty, and if you define yourself as
innocent, you can't accept that (qtd. in
Howells, 18).

During the narrator's visit to the island she makes a close examination of her relationship with her boyfriend Joe, intending not to make the same mistake as with her previous relationship.

He's good in bed, better than the one
before, he's moody but he's not much
bother, we split the rent and he doesn't
talk much, that's an advantage (*Surf*,
26).

She is satisfied with her relationship with Joe. When Joe asks the narrator to marry him, and she refuses saying that she had done it before and does not want to go through the same pain:

It was true, but the words were coming out of me like the mechanical words from a talking doll, the kind with the pull tape at the back; the whole speech was unwinding everything in order a spool (*Surf*, 60).

She later informs him that: "I don't love you" (*Surf*, 105). Her partner assures her that her occupation as a commercial illustrator is of no use. He claims she should get to something more usable since "there have never been any important woman artists" (*Surf*, 33).

The narrator's link to nature brings the sense of life back, surviving on mushrooms, plants and berries. She feels a complete change in her life:

Through the trees the sun glances; the swamp around me smoulders, energy of decay turning to growth, green fire. I remember the heron; by now it will be insects, frogs, fish, other herons. My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply (*Surf*, 121).

By remaining in the island and being attached to nature this helps her to discover her true self. Irena Dudova states:

As the narrator wanders the field, she travels in time and finds out that the more time she spends in nature, the more she becomes aware of her identity as a descendent of previous generations, as part of a natural world and last but not least, as a woman. (4)

Memories of the past are related to the sense of who we are. For, in general, memories, pain, guilt, and subjectivity are all interconnected. The narrator comments:

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: if the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I'll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it, the ones who

could help are gone. I run quickly over my version of it, my life, checking it like an alibi; it fits, it's all there till the time I left (*Surf*, 49).

Throughout the novel the narrator does not have a name and she is cut off from her feelings and the people around her. "*Surfacing* has often been seen as the protagonist's personal/ spiritual/ or rebirth journey" (Moss, 37).

The truth behind the narrator's memories is hidden behind feverish polarities. Alice M. Palumbo in an essay entitled "**On the Border: Margaret Atwood's Novels**", states:

Her more ambiguously happy childhood is hidden behind the preternaturally idyllic one she describes, while a failed affair and an abortion lies beneath her disturbingly violent descriptions of marriage and childhood. (qtd, Bloom, 23)

By accepting her own guilty cruelties the narrator undergoes a rebirth, while she surfaces with "the primeval one who have to learn, shape of a goldfish now in my belly, undergoing its watery changes" (*Surf*, 138). She and the father of her child "can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other... and we will probably fail" (*Surf*, 139). When she returns from her surfacing in the water she faces many forgotten memories beside creating many false memories. Roberta White in an article entitled "Northern Light: Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*", states:

The narrator's denial of her own history- the fact that her lover has forced her to have an abortion _____ leads her to create in her own mind a false history in which she has married and abandoned her child. The narrator's best moment of sanity and control seem to occur when she is floating alone or with her companions in a canoe on the lake searching for her father. (qtd, in Bloom, 162)

The narrator wants to get rid of the past: she tries her best to purify herself from any connection with the past. She revives her own past searching for an understanding of her own femininity. A fair example is when she casts off her ring into the fire to burn in spite of

the fact that the ring cannot be burnt but she aims at melting her blood as a symbol of purifying herself from the past, she claims her separation from civilization: " Everything from history must be eliminated" (*Surf*, 128). She does not want to be dominated by man as a symbol of civilization. The people surrounding the narrator consider her a mad woman, because of her escape from their civilization, as she claims: "They would never believe it's only a natural woman, state of nature" (*Surf*, 138). The narrator is a female figure who recreates her past and rewrites her subjectivity. "Atwood's investigation of female subjectivity ranges from explorations of the female as victim, to representations of the dissembling, monstrous female" (Macpherson, 22).

When the narrator arrives at the lake she recognizes that only through suffering she is able to return to the landscape of her childhood. She felt:

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 (*Surf*, 7).

When she later dives into the lake, the water this time is green and murky creating a sense of otherness which is connected to a description of amniotic fluid. It is considered an element of wonder.

Pale green, then darkness, layer after
layer the water seemed to have
thickened, in its pinprick lights flicked
and darted, red and blue, yellow and
white, and I saw they were fish, the
chasm-dwellers, fins lined with
phosphorescent sparks, teeth neon
(*Surf*, 102).

Later the narrator enters fully into a meditation when she dives into the lake, to see the underwater petroglyphs that will surrender and renew her:

Anything that suffers and dies instead
of us is Christ; canned spam
canned Jesus, even the plants must be
Christ. But we refuse to worship; the
body worships with blood and muscle
but the thing in the knob head will not,
wills not to, the head is greedy, it
consumes but does not give thanks
(*Surf*, 101).

She is able to gain a spiritual awakening and a feeling of wholeness through her dive into the wreck. Branko Gorjup in an essay entitled "**Margaret Atwood's Poetry and Poetics**" states the narrator undertakes "a metaphorical journey back into time and into primordial landscape" (qtd, in Howells, 139). The narrator finally decides to return to the human world healed, whole and with new eyes. It is her child that will enable her to bridge the gap between 'self' and 'society'. She also finds herself in communing with the natural world and what she calls the gods of nature (Moss, 15). Reflecting on the gods of nature the narrator states:

These gods, here on the shore or in the water, unacknowledged or forgotten, were the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed; and freely (*Surf*, 104).

Even though she "didn't know the names of the ones I was making the offering to; but they were there, they had power" (*Surf*, 105).

Her final resolution: "To trust is to let go" (*Surf*, 139), of her friends, boyfriend, Joe and the city life just for the sake of remaining in the island. She doesn't want to make the same mistake as before. The ending reflects the narrator's search for her true identity and the rejection of her false self. David Staines in an essay entitled "**Margaret Atwood in her Canadian Context**" states: "At the end of *surfacing*, the woman returns to the surface haven shaken off past encumbrances and willing now to begin anew" (qtd, in Howells, 18).

There is hope for the narrator to begin a new life and have a brighter future. The novel's final sentence: "the lake is quiet; the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing" (*Surf*, 139).

Conclusion

Surfacing is a novel about submersion and self-discovery, through which Atwood aims at reflecting the way, the narrator digs stuff up from beneath the surface.

Through the narrator's search for her lost father, she searches for her lost self which is divided between the social 'self' and her inner 'self'. Her self is alienated in a way that to become whole again she intends to take off her clothes, revert to animal identity and embark upon a quest in which she finds her dead father as well as her lost self because the danger of living in a false self is to lose one's self identity.

Culture, language and history play an important role during the narrator's search for her own identity. Nature helps the narrator to discover her true identity and home.

The message at the end of the novel is that no individual is left in insularity without science, without elite culture, without popular culture, without mass culture. The narrator is finally left clinging to small rocks of a barely remembered and unadapted past.

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