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## The Woman in the Land: Space, Insanity and Textualization in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

### Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* can be analyzed as an incomplete female rite of passage, where the heroine descends into madness in quest for herself. Incomplete, because it ends ambiguously, at the point beyond the threshold where the protagonist has to decide whether to step back into consensus reality, or rather 'consensus sanity,' or remain in the realm of madness. The narrative builds on the conflict between a duality in self-construction: one is the protagonists' autonomous perception of herself, while the other is an alternative construct authored by her societal surroundings, and forced upon her as the script she is expected to follow. As the protagonist tries to perform the desired personality and conform to the norms and expectations of society, her autonomous self-construct is repressed to the unconscious level of her psyche. To regain and redefine that personality, she opts for projecting it onto the physical environment.

The present essay examines the geographical surface Atwood uses for the self-projection of the heroine: the nameless everywoman steps out of the artificial spatial and cultural (con)text and tries to redefine herself via the archetypal landscape of the Canadian wilderness. It analyzes how artificial and natural spaces are utilized in either aiding or obstructing the healing process and show how Canada as a therapeutic landscape finally enables the protagonist to come to terms with her traumatized and repressed self.

### Résumé

*Surfacing* (*Faire surface*) de Margaret Atwood peut être interprété comme le rite de passage inachevé d'une femme qui sombre dans la folie pendant sa quête de soi. Rite de passage inachevé parce que le roman prend fin à un moment où la protagoniste doit décider si elle préfère la réalité sensorielle, la « normalité », à la folie. La narration se fonde sur la dualité de la construction de soi de l'héroïne et oppose l'image qu'elle a d'elle-même à une image que son environnement sociétal lui impose et qu'elle suit comme un scénario. Au fur et à mesure que la protagoniste s'efforce de se conformer à cette image imposée ainsi qu'aux normes et aux attentes de la société, son image d'elle-même est repoussée dans son inconscient. Pour retrouver sa propre personnalité, l'héroïne se projette dans le paysage qui l'entoure.

Cette étude analyse comment Atwood se sert du paysage pour illustrer cette projection de soi : une femme sans nom quitte son (con)texte spatio-culturel artificiel et essaye de se redéfinir grâce au paysage archétypique et sauvage du Canada. L'étude démontre comment les espaces artificiels et naturels entravent ou soutiennent ce processus de guérison et présente le Canada comme un paysage thérapeutique qui permet à l'héroïne de se réconcilier avec son image de soi refoulée et traumatisée.

**Variations sur la Communauté :**

l'espace canadien



“words here are as pointless  
as calling in a vacant wilderness”  
(Margaret Atwood, “Journey to the Interior”)

“There is something down there and you want it told”  
(Gewndolyn MacEwen, “Dark Pines Under Water”)

There are many narratives which use the physical environment as a reflecting surface for aspects of the fictitious characters' thoughts or emotions. Internal processes are projected into and bounce off their surroundings, acting as emphases or, on the contrary, counterpoints to the plot or certain aspects of the characters' personality. The storms of *Wuthering Heights* parallel the turmoil of Heathcliff's mind while the lush wilderness in *The Scarlet Letter* mirrors Hester's womanhood otherwise masked by the Puritan garb she is forced to wear. In some narratives – like for example in Edgar Allan Poe's “The Fall of the House of Usher” – the link between the characters and their environment goes far beyond simple interaction, and the protagonists' personalities enter into a symbiotic relationship with their surroundings.

In these cases the physical environment often functions as a projecting surface for something that is otherwise absent, hidden, or suppressed. In my essay I would like to examine the use of the spatial environment as reflective surface in Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*. Atwood's work – which predominantly focuses on male–female relationships, and often concerns itself with the detrimental effects of patriarchal discourse on women's personality – goes beyond simply documenting the objectification of women, and, as Brownley emphasizes, “most of her work has valorized refusals of victimhood” (8). Thus many of her narratives not only provide an insight into the obstacles women face in a male-dominated discourse when trying to define themselves, but offer alternative ways out.

The namelessness of the main character of *Surfacing* grants her universality through anonymity. She is Everywoman, cast in a victim position in the Atwoodian tradition. Most of the other female characters also remain unnamed: the two francophone Madames, and the protagonist's mother are defined by their affiliation to patriarchal discourse, as wives and mothers. Most of the male characters – Joe, David, Paul – are named, their agency and subjecthood seemingly ensured via independent designation. Beyond serving as counterpoints to the protagonists' namelessness, they are in themselves just as much clichés, and hence defuse the individuality of the supporting cast as well. Judith Fetterley asserts that

Forced to read men's texts, women are forced to become characters in those texts. And since the stories men tell assert as fact what women know to be fiction, not only do women lose the power that comes from authoring; more significantly, they are forced to deny their own reality and to commit in effect a kind of psychic suicide. (159)

I will posit that via the primeval landscape of the Canadian bush the protagonist of the novel is granted a chance to redefine herself as subject by dislocating herself into an environment stripped of patriarchal influence. As Shannon Hengen points out, “[e]vocative descriptions of the wild natural setting of this novel serve as a counterpoint to the empty and often hurtful



exchanges between human characters” (79). The narrator of *Surfacing* is denied self-expression on surfaces dominated by patriarchal discourse, so she has to make do with gaps that she finds, to be able as a reader to fill these “blanks with projections” (168) – as Wolfgang Iser formulates the reader’s (re)constructive interaction with the ellipses in the text. Translated into the physical environment we may say that the blanks mark the domain outside patriarchal discourse – like the wilderness, traditionally designated as feminine – which presents itself as a possible surface of inscription for a female text.

The narrative is a rite of passage, in which the protagonist seemingly goes on the quest of her missing father who has disappeared into the bush. But this journey also involves her quest to discover “the most natural layer of the self ... under layers of culture” (78), a task that Sharon Wilson calls an “anti-quest towards survival” (180). The epicenter of events is located around the traumatic experiencing of abortion, or rather the absence thereof: the artificial termination of an unwanted pregnancy is suppressed and overwritten with a narrative of conventional social failure. For two thirds of the narrative the protagonist performs the role of a divorced mother who has abandoned her husband and child, and thereby negated traditional expectations. The struggle between desire and expectation sends shockwaves through the narrator’s personality torn between subjecthood and objecthood, and leads the protagonist to negate her past transgression, and overwrite it with a narrative that conforms to societal norms.

Yet for Atwood’s protagonist it is not only the lost child that constitutes the complex trauma she has to cope with, but also the deaths of her parents whom she has not mourned, and thus not released. This amalgam of postponed grief is further aggravated by the fact that the male reading of a female ‘condition’ – which denies the legitimacy of mental distress caused by abortion – inscribes itself onto the female text, overwrites it, and tries to eliminate the woman’s self-reading. This suppressed narrative is not erased, but lurks in the subtext as a marked absence which not only subverts the textual level, the surface of the narrator’s personality – as can be retrospectively seen throughout the narrative – but threatens to unravel it, just like the mental constitution of the protagonist slowly deteriorates as she gradually lapses into madness.

The narrator wears patriarchal conventions like a mask, similar to the make-up her friend Anna compulsively puts on each day, in fear that David, her partner, loses interest in her aging body: the expectations of male-dominated discourse that she remain young and desirable are literally inscribed on her face. When questioned by the protagonist about her anxiety at having left her make-up kit at home during an outing, she replies:

“He’ll notice, don’t you worry. Not now maybe, it hasn’t all rubbed off, but in the morning. He wants me to look like a young chick all the time, if I don’t he gets mad.” ... “He’s got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I’m never sure.” (156)

Anna’s seemingly fulfilling and loving relationship only functions because of the mask she is made to wear. David is by no means content within this framework, he feels the tension between the role performed and the woman suppressed, but ascribes guilt to Anna. By saying “she makes me do it” (176), he constructs her as the agent and author in their sad performance



of a love game. Both are prisoners of their rigid expectations, yet while David is cast as actor by society's prescribed gender-roles, Anna's self-reading as author of her own text is under erasure.

The two women are embodied palimpsests, as their performance overwrites and hides their self-readings, and while Anna has reconciled herself to exist within the culturally prescribed framework, the narrator tries to resist erasure. While the coating of lies – the fictitious narrative she imagines herself to inhabit – she has painted on herself keeps her frame together, the overwritten memories persistently want to re-surface, threatening to tear the vellum apart. Roberta Culbertson, in her analysis of the manifestations of suppressed traumatic memories says:

... beneath the functional patterns provided by memories for action in the everyday, memories do persist, like the materials inaccessible to the normal waking state. Such memories, it seems, possess an energy of flow that leads to their movement from whatever locked places, whatever traumatized neural pathways they inhabit, into the interstices of the everyday: into the moments of daydream, of highway hypnosis, into the open field of images before sleep, into dreams themselves. (175)

This tension is projected into the narrator's environment, which she constantly attempts to read as a map to decode herself; this map relies on the mental landscape of her childhood, which she spent in the wilderness with her family, and which manifests itself as a utopian state of innocence, a pastoral idyll her split and unraveling personality longs for with nostalgia.

Yet she accepts the male-normative reading at first, and tries to suppress the increasing tension between the prescribed interpretations and her conflicting self-reading. Judith Fetterley's analysis of Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" may also be applied here, as the two readings of the same person "are not simply alternate versions of reality, [but] rather, radically incompatible" (160). The tension between the two mutually exclusive readings of the female text projected upon the same surface – the female body – mounts and slowly becomes unbearable, threatening to delete the subtextual woman and drive the character insane.

To avoid erasure, the protagonist desperately searches for alternative surfaces unto which they may inscribe the text of her self-reading, and thus reassert and regain authorship over her own narrative. Traditional means of recording are denied by the male proscriptions and expectations: Atwood's protagonist is a graphic artist making a living by illustrating children's books, but her creativity is debilitated by the publisher's requirement for "visual clichés codified by market demand" (Dvorak 125); the resulting product is rid of all signs of individuality, and devoid of authorial marks. She is denied the possibility to proclaim artistic control over her creation, thus the traditional means of self-expression which may function as outlet for self-assertion is inaccessible to her.

The search for an alternative surface onto which to re-textualize her dissenting self-reading leads her to re-construct her spatial contexts as possible sites of inscription. It is interesting to note that the narrative delineates the inhabited terrain as the male domain, while nature is reserved as the female territory: the plot locates the male readings in the sphere of the artificial, and presents male attempts to read nature as futile. The dead loon left behind by hunters may be read as symbolizing the inability of the (male) hunters to interact with the natural



environment in a meaning-producing way, the “processed text,” the loon remains indigestible, incomprehensible, and is abandoned; the documentary David and Joe are making and which bears the title “Random Samples,” similarly comments on the lack of a discernible pattern in the assembled data, as the environment is rendered unreadable to its male audience. Whether simply puzzled by it, or driven to radical rewriting, the male readership is at loss when confronted with the natural text.

Likewise, the narrator feels displaced in the realm of the urban text. It is very interesting to see how the protagonist tries to overwrite the artificial in terms of nature. Not only by recurrently constructing her companions in terms of animals, but also by allowing nature to intrude into the urban environment. A poignant example is the stuffed moose ‘family’ they encounter at a gas station (11). Father-mother-daughter-son, a manifestation of the narrator’s own family, is ultimately subverted into parody by the grotesquely humanized appearance of the animals. For the others, especially the male ‘readers,’ they are nothing but “random samples,” curiosities in the cabinet of the landscape. For the protagonist, on the other hand, these instances of intrusive, disfigured nature embody the feeling of being out of place.

The narrative shows a gradual progress from urban through rural to nature; yet the artificial realm denies entrance. Just as the protagonist is constantly unable to read and interpret her companions’ attempts at communication, both verbal and non-verbal – for this some critics have analyzed her as a high-functioning autistic – she is also unable to navigate the urban landscape: “Nothing is the same. I don’t know the way any more” (10), she says when she fails at acting as a guide to the party upon return to her home town.

Upon finally entering the private sphere of her family home by the lake – the last outpost of civilization – she frantically tries to read her surroundings and assemble the random object world into a coherent and intelligible sign system. She tries to assemble arbitrary artefacts and memorabilia of her parents into an ancestral map which shows her the way to herself: her father’s drawings, her mother’s photo album, her and her brother’s scrapbooks, all documents, fragments of the lost utopia of her childhood, out of which she hopes to construct herself: “I was in most of the pictures, shut in behind the paper; or not me but the missing part of me” (137).

At a certain, climactic point the narrative culminates in the destruction of this artificial object world: while the albums and scrapbooks connect to her past, they simultaneously also chronicle the imprinting of patriarchal patterns on her personality. Her childhood scrapbooks contain “illustrations cut from magazines” (115), pictures of women which embody the possible roles for women in a male-dominated society: “when they asked you what you were going to be when you grew up, your said ‘A lady’ or ‘A mother,’ either one was safe; and it wasn’t a lie, I did want to be those things” (115). When Atwood’s heroine goes on a rampage through the house, and destroys the ‘map’ constructed out of her objectified childhood memories, she consciously rejects them as a script which delineates the possible roles for women as presented by patriarchal discourse.

Atwood’s heroine then steps out of the spatial and cultural (con)text that created the contradictory versions of self in the first place, and projects herself onto the protean surface of nature, a *place inchoate*: a context that is not empty in a spatial sense, but which denotes potential without any imposed artificial framework. This natural canvas is flexible and neu-



tral enough to allow the protagonist to assert her self-reading as a valid version of her own reality.

She initially tries to read the natural environment from the vantage point of civilization: she frequently relies upon survival manuals, information obtained in school, Latin names for plants and animals, and maps, all part of the cultural code system – in which the wilderness may only be read in terms of civilization – she is attempting to distance herself from. In contrast, all the male characters can do is to subject nature to such an overwriting: David repeatedly remarks that “you couldn’t get that in the city,” and thus constructs the wilderness in terms of the romantic pastoral; male presences in the forest are agents of civilization which overwrite the landscape in urban terms, chopping wood, or altering the shoreline – as the Electric Company employee marks the line up to which the Company will flood the territory –, they are all subjecting the environment to alteration. Fishing and hunting are not primary means to obtain food, but performative acts of maleness. This threat culminates in the figure of the protagonist’s father, who as biologist should have been nature’s ally, yet was employed by the Paper Company, playing an active role in transforming nature into artificiality.

Atwood’s protagonist realizes this intrusion of culture into nature, which renders the interface just as grotesque as the stuffed moose family. She finally discards the prescribed ways to approach nature, to cross the threshold between the urban domain and the wilderness. The lake functions as the portal into this realm of otherness, and the shards of native mythology and ritual as the preparatory vehicles to get there. She dives and surfaces, in reality and symbolically as well. The repressed layer of self finally asserts its dominance over the imposed surface, and although this is the point which reveals the narrator as unreliable, and annihilates what the reader believed to be narrative truth so far, this sudden shift in the parallax view of reality also marks the point in the plot where the discordant gaps fall into place and gain meaning. They retrospectively overwrite the narrative, and thus unmask it as a construct forced upon the protagonist by the expectations of patriarchal society, a process which is mirrored in the reader’s acceptance of phantasm as narrative truth.

Male presence in *Surfacing*’s wilderness is transformed: the trinity of the drowned father, the almost drowned brother and the aborted child – this may be read as representing the past, present and the future, the omnipresence of patriarchal text – accompany the heroine’s surfacing from the water, which marks the beginning of her inscription into nature. Water – itself imbued with a rich symbolism of life, birth – is the demise of the male presence, yet functions as a portal to the heroine into the new world. Purified of the detritus of patriarchal culture, she emerges into nature clean and new: “[t]he dive into the wreck of her fragmented self results in a spiritual awakening and a feeling of wholeness” (Vevaina 91).

The wilderness as projecting surface is neutral, and may be read as either devoid of male authorship, or, if constructed in patriarchal terms, as the ultimate female realm. Positions of power are transposed, and the male presence, the animalistic father-figure lurking in the shadows and on the periphery of vision – or the margins of sanity – metamorphoses into a synergistic man-animal presence, its text already appropriated and overwritten by nature/woman as author. At the same time the ghost of the Mother appears in front of the house, linking the female presence back to the realm of the artificial, a link which keeps the portal open for a possible return.



This ultimately female surface allows the protagonist to eliminate all presences of the male and male-engendered text: first David, Joe, and Anna – the erased and overwritten woman – are removed. Language, yet another cultural construct – and thus part of patriarchal discourse – is abandoned, and her name, linguistic signifier of the self, is discarded. The narrative then sees a gradual distancing from the artificial environment by invoking the notion of ritual taboo: the house, man-made objects such as clothes, processed foods are tabooed as unclean. The ring of the “non-husband” is ritually purified by fire. Scrapbooks and pictures of her family are burned. Food that “results” from agriculture is dispensed with next, as the vegetable garden becomes forbidden territory when the gate stops her.

She slowly metamorphoses into something non-human, and reconstructs herself as an animal that fits into the narrative of the wilderness. By connecting with her childhood, and reenacting a childhood game mentioned earlier (166), she succeeds in erasing the male-prescribed construction she has become. She is inscribed into nature and nature is inscribed into her: “My feet moved over the rocks and mud, stepping in my day-old footprints, backtracking; in my brain the filaments, trails reconnected and branched” (166). She slowly regresses from animal into plant, and finally comes to the realization that “I am not an animal or tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place” (236).

She confronts and embraces her mother in harmony with the house – the realm of the artificial world – and takes her place, thereby acknowledging the mother-potential in herself. She also confronts the father-figure in the land, and discards it as something that is identical to, but at the same time distinct from the maleness of her father, as a text reverted and overwritten by nature, and thus harmless to her as it is now under her control. These meetings then bring closure, and she is finally able to let her parents go, just as earlier she reconciles with her dead child when she surfaces from the lake.

At the end of this regression from the artificial she becomes the landscape, and the landscape becomes an abstraction as the fish that jumps is simultaneously the “idea of the fish” (243). Signifiers and signified conflate into one simultaneity, and eventually all persona and spectral presences converge into herself when she discovers and acknowledges that the footprints of the being – the father-animal – she saw at the gate are in reality her own. Through the symbolic act of stepping into her own footprints, she becomes one with the land, whole again, and may begin to make her way back through the *terra incognita* to the threshold between the worlds. The Grail she was looking for is re-gained: not only her sanity, but the promise of a growing life in her womb. Reassured of her whole-ness and authorship she may now be able to confront Joe’s male presence as an equal.

## Conclusion

In my reading of Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* the artificial environment – urban or rural – is a place that ultimately denies female reading and construction, that is, its patriarchal essence remains untouched. The protagonist of the novel finds a surface for textualization that resists and neutralizes male presence and the prescriptive expectations of society. She utilizes the femaleness of North American nature ascribed to the wilderness by the male colonizers to



redefine it as a space of her own. Devoid of societal influence, it becomes suitably neutral and flexible to function as a site of self-inscription and self-definition.

Using the pre-colonial native cultural framework as the vehicle of creation, she re-constructs and re-textualizes her personality – pushed to the subtext by patriarchal discourse – within the framework of the wilderness, but is able to retain sight of the portal between the realms, never completely severing the connection between consensus sanity and the realm of otherness she temporarily withdraws into. As she says “crazy people can come back, from wherever they take refuge” (131), and Atwood’s protagonist obtains the possibility to re-claim authorship, to textualize her real self, and to return from beyond the threshold into her homeland, finally discarding the mask of the fictitious self she had been forced to wear.

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