

MYTH AND STEREOTYPES IN THE NOVEL *SURFACING* BY MARGARET ATWOOD

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My own view is that my novel is not a treatise at all, but a novel; that it concerns characters with certain backgrounds and habits of mind, placed in a particular environment and reacting to it in their own ways; that it does not exist for the sake of making a statement but to tell a story.

(Margaret Atwood, 'A Reply', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2 Winter 1976)

Abstract: *Margaret Atwood is one of accomplished Canadian writers that identify themselves with the home country and no important issue of Canadian culture and life is missing from her oeuvre. She masterfully combines feminism, ecology and nationalism in the novel "Surfacing", so complex in theme, deep in reasoning and poetic in expression. The travel into the wilderness reminds us of the long tradition of quest narratives imbued with a clear spiritual dimension. Nature is not a landscape or scenery, but ecology sensitive, a necessary space where we connect with the environment as an inner urge, being defined by the natural world in spirituality. The author bitterly criticizes ecological carelessness everywhere in Canada, but particularly at the American in terms of survival and autonomy in the "border country": bulldozed trees, power lines running into the forest, a rocket base: "the disease is spreading up from the south". (Surfacing, 7)*

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Canadian writers have been inspired by Canada's vast geography and very harsh climate, primarily adopting the theme of survival. *Surfacing* (1972) is one of Atwood most popular novels in Canada focusing on this productive topic.

Surfacing and Survival contribute to national discussions in Canada in a couple of well-known ways: from the integral link between Atwood's and Northrop Frye's writing to the ambiguous relationship between Canadians and Americans in Surfacing, these books have proven to be important to debates about Canadian identity and belonging.¹ (Dobson 2009:27)

It is also one of the most poetic novels she has written, by association with her poetry for having "a considerable thematic and stylistic territory".² (Sherrill 1980:97) This can be explained by the complex imagery and metaphors, expanding the theme of *The Edible Woman* about the female protagonist's alienation from social expectations, in a context

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¹ Dobson, *Transnational Canadas: Anglo-Canadian Literature and Globalization*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press Waterloo, ON, CAN, 2009, p.27

² Sherrill, "Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood", *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Ken, Montreal, 1980, p.97

created by a combination of issues related to ecology, nationalism and ancestry. These concerns, newly integrated in the feminist theory, are blended in this novel to treat their common theme: guilt versus innocence. Therefore, the reading of this book is undoubtedly culture specific whilst nationalism and feminism interact with autonomy and identity. The fight for freedom, autonomy and identity is extended beyond sexual politics as Atwood addresses Canada's struggle to escape cultural domination by America. She often refers to notions of ideological imperialism by saying that: "what we have done in this country is to use imported gods like imported everything else".³ (Atwood quoted in Graeme Gibson, p.19)

This novel can be read on several levels: detective story, ghost story and parody of a fairy tale, but the core is the double problematic of myth and national identity. Between myths and Freudian symbolism, this is a story of inadequacy and guilt which have manifestations such as revolt, isolation and despair, in the context of a degenerate contemporary civilization. This is in stark contrast to wilderness and simple life and also a parody of traditional romantic love that becomes obscenity in the new dimension of human experience, especially the female one. The stereotypical male "straight power" has "no conscience or piety".⁴ (Atwood 1972a: 127-128)

The concept of *Canadianness* and the consistent Canadian question of national identity are related to the myths and stereotypes: the canoe, wilderness, frontier with America, unity between English and French Canada. Daniel Francis explains the notion of "myth" in his book *National Dreams*, where he states that "...myths are not lies, or at least, not always".⁵ (Francis 1997:16) He has studied some of the Canadian myths and also the history behind the formation of them and I address the topics in his book as the main sources producing examples of Canadian myths for this study.

"*Surfacing* is a deeply ambiguous and ambivalent book"⁶ (Dobson 2009:28), with four main characters. The narrator is an unnamed woman, having a partner called Joe. They travel together with another couple, Anna and David, by car, to rural Quebec where the narrator's parents' home was until her father went missing mysteriously. "I can't believe I'm on this road again" she says.⁷ (Atwood 1972a:1) The narrator does not give details to her companions, keeping for herself all the suppositions she makes and subsequently, trying to interpret her father's sketches of Indigenous rock drawings and maps of the lakes in that regions. A number of tensions are revealed, both trans-national (between the Canadians and Americans) and intra-national (between the French and the English in Quebec on one hand, and between the Canadians and Indigenous people on the other hand). The narration is full of reference to the unnamed woman's past, that she has not been Joe's partner for a long time and she is uncomfortable with her own body, maybe because of the aborted child. A shift in the course of the narration occurs when her actual external search becomes more and more inward. Once with the sexist attitudes of men in her group and their trips into the wilderness, she begins to dissociate herself from them

³ Atwood quoted in Graeme Gibson, *Dissecting the Way a Writer Works*, p.19

⁴ Atwood, *Surfacing*. Virago Press, London, 1972a, p.127-128

⁵ Francis, *National Dreams; Myth, Memory, and Canadian History*. Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, 1997, p.16

⁶ Dobson, *Transnational Canadas: Anglo-Canadian Literature and Globalization*. Wilfrid Laurier, University Press Waterloo, ON, CAN, 2009, p.28

⁷ Atwood, *Surfacing*. Virago Press, London, 1972a, p.1

and from civilization, as a reaction to all that she dislikes or even hates in her life. Being confident that she has become pregnant by Joe, she wants to raise the baby far from civilization. As a matter of fact, she would like to become a beast, living 'naturally', having the body covered by fur, not wearing clothes or do whatever humans do, free from any taint of the civilized world. She realizes that her friends will return to search for her, to bring her back into the city, but the book's end is ambiguous. The boundaries she transgresses are both physical and psychological, as the all the things that happen have their spiritual counterpart. If we think of the narrator's past, it is obviously that there is a strong connection with the changes at present, at all levels. Memories from childhood have a strong echo in her adulthood years, as they are revealed by turning the pages of a scrap book she used to keep together with her brother. Also the memories of her kid brother torturing animals in his 'laboratory': "He kept them in jars and tin cans"⁸ (ibid. p.125) are similar to her lover's attitude toward her unborn child: "He said it wasn't a person, only an animal".⁹ (ibid. p.138)

The narrator seeks to regain her connection with archaic feminine wisdom, symbolized in the text by her mysterious mother. Her Father is also remembered as he was alive. In her mysterious powers, the mother is aligned with nature, hence after her death, the narrator sees her as a bird: "I squint up at them, trying to see her, trying to see which one she is".¹⁰ (ibid. p.176) She is innocent, and consequently, like the slaughtered heron, a victim. The narrator concludes that: "The innocents get slaughtered because they exist".¹¹ (ibid. p.121-122) Eco-feminism supports the claim of victimization regarding the patriarchal society as an aggressive one.

By avoiding human food, the narrator induces a sort of trance-like state, and within this state of mind, she finally sees her mother, feeding the birds, though 30 years younger than when she last saw her. A day later she encounters her father, as a mythical creature: "It does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself".¹² (ibid. p.181) The next morning, she realizes she has had a spiritual communication with her parents – "I saw them and they spoke to me, in the other language".¹³ (ibid. p.182) She understands that she will never see them again in real life: "from now on I'll have to live in the usual way, defining them by their absence; and love by its failures, power by its loss, its renunciation".¹⁴ (ibid. p.183)

The conclusion of the novel seems to emphasize the opposition between the dialogical and the monological self. The travel into the wilderness has proven to be more like a journey of self-discovery.

The use of simplified stereotypes, as for example "the loud American" and "the Canadian canoe/wilderness" constitutes an effective method that deals with issues concerning national identity.

The Americans

⁸ ibid. p.125

⁹ ibid. p.138

¹⁰ ibid. p.176

¹¹ ibid. p.121-122

¹² ibid. p.181

¹³ ibid. p.182

¹⁴ ibid. p.183

A close reading of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* produces several examples of American stereotypes.

One of the first examples of American stereotypes is the passage where the protagonist refers to Americans as drunkards, talking of the Americans that hollowed out the pit close to the border, mentioning that “they were good for business, they drank a lot”.¹⁵ (ibid. p.3) Another scene in the novel pictures two American tourists breaking the peace and quiet of the lake. The image of Americans as loud and obnoxious is shown by the way in which they approach with their boat; “it rounds a point and becomes a roar, homing in on us, big powerboat, the white water veeing from the bow”.¹⁶ (ibid. p.60) The fact that the Americans have a big powerboat, and later they are described wearing “nifty outfits” points to the stereotype picture of Americans as wealthy people who show off. Further stereotypes appear in the passage where the Americans are described as being wasteful and disrespectful of regulations. “They're the kind who catch more than they can eat and they'd do it with dynamite if they could get away with it”.¹⁷ (ibid. p.60)

Americanism that the narrator associates with technology, violence and destruction is the opposite of Nature, her refuge, which strangely leads to her ambivalent rejection of and likely return to society in the last parts of the novel because her clear divisions between what is pure and what is contaminated break down. As Donna Gerstenberger clearly states:

*Atwood has left us in this novel more than a sociological record; there are here hieroglyphics by which human beings may find their ways beyond the old confining myths of nurture. She has engaged our attention at the levels of myth and language in a way that enlarges our conceptual horizons.... we should examine our world a little differently because we have experienced Surfacing.*¹⁸ (Gerstenberger 1976:148-149)

The novel shows this disruption of differences, in all ethical classifications. First she labels all that is negative as American, in contrast to a seeming pure Canadian society, gradually elements of American corruption penetrate the Canadian sphere, both as border crossing and symbolically. The narrator meets a hunter named Bill Malmstrom, who expresses his intention to buy her property for a group of Detroit-based outdoorsmen, the “Wildlife Protection Association of America,” whose desire to kill animals reveals her anti-American biases.

The narrator and her companions meet a pair of fishermen in a remote wild place while searching for her missing father, and assume from their appearance that they are Americans: “They had a starry flag like all of them, a miniature decal sticker on the canoe bow. To show us we were in occupied territory”.¹⁹ (ibid. p.115) They had killed a heron for no apparent reason, which made the narrator believe that “it must have been the Americans” who did it. The needlessly murdered heron comes to symbolize the victimization of the innocent, which is a theme that appears throughout the text.

“I couldn't tell how it had been done, bullet, smashed with a stone, hit with a stick... They must have got it before it had time to rise”.²⁰ (ibid. p.110) This image speaks of the

¹⁵ ibid. p.3

¹⁶ ibid. p.60

¹⁷ ibid. p.60

¹⁸ Gerstenberger, "Conceptions Literary and Otherwise: Women Writers and the Modern Imagination," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 9 (Winter), 1976, p.148-149

¹⁹ ibid. p.115

²⁰ ibid. p.110

cruelty of the “civilized” people against nature and the innocent. Actually, this idea is a continuation of the statement from the beginning of the novel: a “disease is spreading up from the South” and David calls them “the fascist pig Yanks”²¹ (Atwood 1972a:1), a very strong anti-American attitude.

The Canadians who killed the heron become Americans for the narrator, regardless of their nationality: she says: “it doesn’t matter what country they’re from ... they’re still Americans, they’re what’s in store for us, what we are turning into”.²² (ibid. p.95) Hence, the cultural map is not conformable to the geographical one. To understand the Canadian cultural map was one of the central concerns in the time when Atwood came to prominence, being well-known that she promotes a politics of national identification in her writing:

*If Atwood’s vision of Canadian resistance in Surfacing requires untangling, however, it is in part because her protagonist’s openness to difference is limited to that which is already within Canada. If the transnational now informs how literature in Canada conceptualizes itself, then cross-border influences may need to be thought differently. The problems that Surfacing has in maintaining its divisions between Canada and the United States illustrate the very conscious limitations of its vision, at the same time as it projects an ideal, imagined community. In Surfacing, the cognitive map necessary to navigate the world of 1970s Canada contains many exclusions and divisions, and the disjunctive failure of this mapping process leads at least in part to the narrator’s breakdown. This breakdown does not mean, however, that such maps would not prove handy. The popularity of Surfacing and Survival suggests a broad desire for whatever provisional maps might be available.*²³ (Dobson 2009:37)

Americanization

Since Quebec was so distinct, the marks of Americanization are expected to be much more visible than in English Canada. The narrator finds everywhere signs that the Quebec of her childhood has been violated by Americans and also by the Canadians who have assimilated the American values of material progress and disastrous ecological destruction: the road to the village is straightened and shortened, the gas station is decorated with stuffed moose (a possible representation of the narrator’s family in her youth), one of them waving an American flag and the village’s economy only depends on catering to American holiday fishermen,

*businessmen in plaid shirts still creased from the cellophane packages and wives, if they come, who sit in two’s on the screened blackfly-proof porches of the single-room cabins and complain to each other while the men play at fishing.*²⁴ (Atwood 1972a:10)

At the beginning, the narrator assumes, just like David did, that the Americans are easy to identify in the wilderness. They are the ones who scare away the fish, break the game laws by catching far more than they can eat, and who always want all camping equipment to be automatic and collapsible. But in northern Quebec, Americanism does not reveal itself in terms of nationality, but as a state of mind. When the narrator's companions and the Ontario fishermen mistake each other for Americans, she realizes

²¹ Atwood, *Surfacing*. Virago Press, London, 1972a, p.1

²² ibid. p.95

²³ Dobson, *Transnational Canadas: Anglo-Canadian Literature and Globalization*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press Waterloo, ON, CAN, 2009, p.37

²⁴ Atwood, *Surfacing*. Virago Press, London, 1972a, p.10

something quite obvious: it is impossible in North America to be non-American: "If you look like them and talk like them and think like them you are them ... you speak their language, a language is everything you do".²⁵ (ibid. p.95) This is a kind of cathartic confirmation of the truth about her past.

The American frontier

In terms of a cognitive mapping of the transnational space, the relationship between Canada and the USA may be regarded as a threat within the context of national debates:

*[...] Canadians could always partake in the commercial-popular culture of the American West, they also had to reckon with their own West, Canadian myths of the frontier, the West and the North, and their close, one-sided political and economic relationship with the U.S.*²⁶ (Francis 1997:77)

The American frontier motif is read as an aggressive and colonizing compulsion, associated with the quest and contrasting with the Canadian survival motif, which is suggestive of passivity and victimization. "The pervasive menace, the Americans".²⁷ (ibid. p.139) The Canadians are "struggling to differentiate their identity from that of Americans".²⁸ (ibid. p.60) The Canadian Multiculturalism Act reevaluates the meaning of Canadian identity.

According to Homi Bhabha, who exposes the fluidity and narrativity of national identities characterizes the way in which the nation-space can be best described:

*in the process of the articulation of elements: where meanings may be partial because they are in medias res; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of 'composing' its powerful image.*²⁹ (Bhabha 1990:3)

Bhabha's qualification of a nation as an edifice of ideological ambivalence as well as his view on the contingency of national meanings make us question the particulars upon which communities envision their borders, suggesting the steady deferral of a definitive national identity. Myths of an existing immutable national consciousness and a possible unified national culture disallow us to fully understand how the "other is never outside or beyond us",³⁰ (ibid. p.4) while the cultural map is no longer overlapping the geographical one. This collective inability to comprehend is integral to nation-building and belonging.

The wilderness and the canoe

"As much as the beaver or the Canada goose or the maple leaf, the canoe is presented as our link to the land, to the past, to our Aboriginal forebears, and to our spiritual roots".³¹ (Francis 1997:129) It has a constant presence in the history and folklore of Canada. As Daniel Francis further asserts:

²⁵ ibid. p.95

²⁶ Francis, *National Dreams; Myth, Memory, and Canadian History*. Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, 1997, p.77

²⁷ ibid. p.139

²⁸ ibid. p.60

²⁹ Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation." *Nation and Narration*. Routledge, New York, 1990, p.3

³⁰ ibid. p.4

³¹ Francis, *National Dreams; Myth, Memory, and Canadian History*. Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, 1997, p.129

*The canoe, and the story of transformation it embodies, does not belong solely to the Aboriginal people. They are also central emblems of non-Native Canadian culture. [...] the canoe journey into the wilderness has been a consistent theme of our history and our culture.*³² (ibid. p.128)

The canoe, tent and wilderness are all connected, as they speak of typical dimensions of the same world, subordinated to a specific mentality and way of living:

“The rhetoric of canoeing reveals that the myth of wilderness continues to exert a strong attraction”³³ (ibid. p.149), as a contact with truth and freedom and an encounter with history and discovery of national identity:

*The canoe trip is partly an attempt to recapture a past world. It is tinged with nostalgic regret at the loss of a simpler way of life. We believe our ancestors had a more authentic relationships with the natural world; the canoe trip is one means we have of trying to recapture it.*³⁴ (ibid. p.150)

Again, the canoe is more like a mystical object than a vehicle of ordinary travel. Once embarked, people experience a revelation of their ancestral heritage bond and a feeling of belonging to both the visible and invisible world:

And last, the canoe trip is a spiritual quest. It is an opportunity to get away from the banality of everyday life in order to commune with nature and with our spiritual selves. As William James puts it in his essay *The Quest Patter and the Canoe Trip*, the trip follows the circular pattern of the religious quest: the excursionist departs for an unknown country where various ordeals (leaky tents, long portages, black flies, etc.) must be endured before the successful return to civilization with an enhanced self-knowledge and spiritual awareness. Thus the perilous journey may lead to a purification of the self, or the dissolution of past images of the self.³⁵ (ibid. p.151)

The trip by canoe is also dangerous and it requires a lot of skill, as any close interaction with nature and wildlife:

*Neither of them had portaged before; we had to help them lift and balance the canoes. I said maybe they should double up, both of them under one canoe, but David insisted they could do it the real way. I said they should be careful; if the canoe slipped sideways and you didn't get out in time it would break your neck.*³⁶ (Atwood 1972a:83)

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye reads the wilderness as a pastoral space of renewal and redemption, of “escape from society”.³⁷ (Frye 1985:43) Frank Davey was obviously following the same pastoral pattern traced by Frye when he described *Surfacing* as a comedy which begins in social disruption, sends its characters into a healing ‘green world’, and returns them to society capable of restoring it to wholeness. The quest reading of the novel remains the most popular, although different critics use it to different ends. Carol P. Christ, for example, emphasizes the spiritual aspects of the journey, and argues that in order to achieve spiritual enlightenment, the narrator “must choose the isolation of

³² ibid. p.128

³³ ibid. p.149

³⁴ ibid. p.150

³⁵ ibid. p.151

³⁶ Atwood, *Surfacing*. Virago Press, London, 1972a, p.83

³⁷ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton UP, New Jersey, 1985, p.43

the visionary quest”.³⁸ (Christ 1995:120) The quest genre is based on the belief that the heroine can escape society and find self-definition in isolation, and as such, it is deeply rooted in a liberal concept of the self. By beginning *Surfacing* with a travel into the wilderness, Atwood takes her rightful place within the quest narratives tradition and enriching it with a new spiritual dimension. Ostensibly, the narrator’s search for her father becomes a quest for her missing memories, which are the connection knot between her past and to her true self, in an attempt to find isolation since the trauma of an abortion made her regard the society as a dangerous place, characterized by aggression and violence, where “there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them”,³⁹ (Atwood 1972a:122) and the narrator does not perceive herself as an agent, as a searcher as well as a survivor and a victim.

Authenticity and the spiritual quest

Atwood argued that every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core, which she identified as The British Island (a ‘sense of security’), The American Frontier (a ‘sense of adventure or danger’), and for Canada, survival:

*Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back ... The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life.*⁴⁰ (Atwood 1972b:33)

The themes of authenticity and recognition permeate the entire novel. One of the concerns of the narrator is to discover the values that are real or indigenous to her as a female, as a Canadian and as an individual in order to become a “natural woman”.⁴¹ (Atwood 1972a:184)

The narrator’s flight into the wilderness is an attempt to escape her entrapment within social guilt and recover her authentic, innocent self. The notion of an authentic self is minutely described by Taylor who deconstructs the modern ideal of authenticity, by analyzing the tremendous shift in belief from an external and divine morality to an internal moral truth that must be protected against adverse social influences:

‘The myth of Unity’ (English Canada vs. Québécois)

Canadian unity is depicted as a myth, in the falsehood sense she shows that two parallel societies exist in Canada. The content of certain statements made by the narrator, or the characters, also add to this conclusion.

The protagonist of *Surfacing* exclaims: “This is border country”⁴² (ibid. p.30) while she travels to her childhood home in the wilderness of Canada’s North. She means the division between English and French Canada.

The idea of the Canadians who want to distinguish their identity from that of the Americans’ also exists in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, as in the example were two strangers mistake the protagonist and her friends for Americans. One of the strangers asks: “Say, what part of the States are you all from? It’s hard to tell, from your accent”. The

³⁸ Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1995, p.120

³⁹ Atwood, *Surfacing*. Virago Press, London, 1972a, p.122

⁴⁰ Atwood, *Survival*. Virago Press, London, 1972b, p.33

⁴¹ Atwood, *Surfacing*. Virago Press, London, 1972a, p.184

⁴² ibid. p.30

protagonist replies: “We're not from the States,” I said, annoyed that he'd mistaken me for one of them”.⁴³ (ibid. p.122) The protagonist is irritated when she and her company are mistaken for an Americans. It is important for them that their Canadian identity does not merge with the identity of Americans:

“She grins then and the two men grin also, not at me but at each other. I see I've made a mistake, I should have pretended to be an American”, and:

"Amburger, oh yes we have lots. How much?" she asks, adding the final H carelessly to show she can if she feels like it. This is border country.⁴⁴ (ibid. p.16)

The narrator is more convinced of the fact that the rational society represented by her father is no more than a destructive force. She comes to believe that masculine culture has subordinated an innocent feminine nature. Frye supports this belief when writing about the narrative patterns of early myths, asserting that: “It is often assumed that the sexual and maternal myths are older, being more appropriate for an agricultural society, as their rivals were for the patriarchal, tool-using urban society that came later”⁴⁵ (Frye 1985:112) The lack of connection between characters transfers the situation to an indifference to the natural world that has resulted in the “dying white birches”⁴⁶ (Atwood 1972a:9) in the opening pages, the “fished out” lake,⁴⁷ (ibid. p.32) and the “hanged heron”.⁴⁸ (ibid. p.137–138) The narrator meditates over life and suffering in a way that is supposed to be illuminating to 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.*⁴⁹ (ibid. p.164–165)

In the novel's final sentence, “The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing”⁵⁰ (ibid. p.224) is a belief in the force of natural world where the narrator can “begin” and “trust”.⁵¹ (ibid. p.224) Thus, *Surfacing* stands for a powerful manifest for respect to the sacredness of all life forms of the Earth: “Anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other”.⁵² (ibid. p.143)

The parody, irony, metafiction, and intertextuality and the deconstruction of national and social myths are typically postmodern. The ideas in Atwood's novel are an expression of a strong reaction against the consumerism and disrespect for the natural world that defines urban survival:

Canada, as a country with a complex colonial heritage, becomes a site in which liberation is envisioned through a project of nation-building, one in which it might be possible to identify dominant themes as a means of creating a collective identity. As with any collective identity (with the implications of limiting sameness that the term “identity”

⁴³ ibid. p.122

⁴⁴ ibid. p.16

⁴⁵ Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essay*. Princeton UP, New Jersey, 1985, p.112

⁴⁶ Atwood, *Surfacing*. Virago Press, London, 1972a, p.9

⁴⁷ ibid. p.32

⁴⁸ ibid. p.137–138

⁴⁹ ibid. p.164–165

⁵⁰ ibid. p.224

⁵¹ ibid. p.224

⁵² ibid. p.143

contains), this position entails a degree of erasure, as with the erasure of French and Indigenous perspectives in *Surfacing*. These are recorded, sometimes only in passing, as a part of noting the instability of Canadian identity. But these are to be read optimistically with the narrator's suggestions, perhaps erased only in a Canada contaminated by "the Americans"; one free of American or civilizational taint would provide a strong grounds for resistance for the narrator. She sympathizes both with Indigenous people and the rural French, as opposed to the outsiders who maintain that they are "not civilized," and she projects a desire for solidarity against the foreboding city to which she projects her return.⁵³ (Dobson 2009:35)

Conclusions

Although the novel clearly favors nature over civilization, the protagonist's transformation into the 'natural woman' is still unsettling. Indeed, it becomes difficult to read her transformation, as Atwood relies on images rather than logic to move the narrative forward. This emphasis on the land connects with Northrop Frye's famous pronouncement that the central question of Canada is not "Who am?" but "Where is here?"⁵⁴ (Frye 1985:220) She then makes her famous claim about refusing to be a victim, about taking responsibility.

Atwood's work has been consistently seen as referring to the world around her, whether that world is specifically associated with Canada, or whether it is more concerned with contemporary gender relations or with other political positions. *Surfacing* is best read as a quest narrative, and again therefore dismisses it from further consideration.

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⁵³ Dobson, *Transnational Canadas: Anglo-Canadian Literature and Globalization*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press Waterloo, ON, CAN, 2009, p.35

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