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Rites of Passage from a Gender Perspective in *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood

Alumna: María Victoria Sánchez

Directora: Mgtr. María Marcela González de Gatti

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To my parents

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The author

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Introduction

As readers, every time we take a book in our hands, we sink into an act of reading that invites us to think about what the text suggests but remains uncovered. Sometimes, those hidden messages make us reflect upon the links that exist between people and literature. The decision of having chosen the topic we are going to deal with in this work responds to the notion that Margaret Atwood's narrative reflects a bond between the writer and her surroundings: she is the expression of her time. This study intends to analyze the novel *Surfacing* (1972) by Margaret Atwood. Our main interest lies in the journey that the main character takes from the city to her birthplace, which lasts seven days. The entire journey is permeated by a rite of passage that entails not only the 'surfacing' of the main character but also the possibility of analyzing her voice as a voice of the subaltern, somebody who can speak but cannot be heard. In this way, Atwood presents a character that throughout her past and present becomes the voice of a whole generation.

This work intends to address the following hypothesis:

Within a historical-cultural framework signaled by a proliferation of gender studies, Surfacing by Atwood places women as the voice of the subaltern. Its main character is driven by a search of her own identity which entails a rite of passage. She begins a journey towards the "surfacing" of a new historic and metaphysical being.

A lot of questions can be raised from this hypothesis; however, the ones that concern us are: Does Atwood's main character represent a voice of the subaltern? Does the environment in the story work as a catalyst in the rite of passage? How is the rite of passage represented? And where does this rite lead us to? All these questions, and many others that are going to be referred to in this study, are intended to guide us towards the analyses of Atwood's novel from an innovative perspective.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of a novel requires the articulation between the story itself and concepts developed by different authors. The following section will discuss the conceptual units of feminism, subalternity and rites of passage with the aim of explaining how they are portrayed in the novel. Besides, we will refer to the socio-historical context under which Atwood wrote *Surfacing*.

Social and historical context in the production of Margaret Atwood in the 1970s

It is important to reflect upon the links that are established between the author, her novel and the context in which the latter was developed. This analysis helps us approach the protagonist of the novel from a contextualized perspective.

Atwood (Canada, 1939) holds a creative career that includes various genres. Although she is mainly recognized as a story and novel writer, she also has a prolific production in poem writing, short stories and television scripts. Besides, Atwood has contributed to the development and strengthening of Canadian Literature since she has been the Vice-president of the Canadian Writers Association from 2008 until today. This information indicates that this writer has been concerned with Canadian identity, its relationship with the United States, human rights, environmental issues and women's social rights.

Atwood represents a generation that started to produce their works in the 1960s and 70s. This period is important because it brought about an expansion and change in cultural and aesthetic perspectives. Atwood began to publish in 1961 and she is now considered an undeniable representative of contemporary Canadian literature. Many other Canadian artists actively participated in the public sphere, building up an intellectual system that played an important role in the relationships that were established locally and internationally.

During the 1970s, Atwood was extremely productive as she published three novels, a book of short stories, five books of poetry, a book of literary criticism and a book for children. Moreover, she started to be widely recognized at the local and international level. This recognition was parallel to a peak in the development of feminist movements and cultural nationalism. *Surfacing* was received as a feminist and ecological work in the U.S.; however, it received a different treatment in Canada. There, the novel was read as an exponent of nationalist literature since it is immersed in an atmosphere of territorial tension between the two countries. Nevertheless, Atwood is known to be a committed activist for political and social issues and also for the enhancement of human rights not only in Canada but also in the international sphere.

Her commitment towards Canadian national identity together with her work at the Canadian Writers Association, her interest in environmental issues and her concerns with global pollution, her struggle for human rights and their violations on the part of oppressive institutions characterize a writer who is ethically solid in her duty as a writer. At this point,

we would like to take up a constitutive element of her narrative again: her canadianness. Through her writings and interviews, Atwood shows the cultural aspects of Canada to the world. She has done the invaluable effort to translate Canada for the rest of the world by showing its geographical features, history, cultural heritage and myths. Her representation of Canada is a combination of a realistic documentation and an imaginative interpretation from her perspective as a white Canadian woman who speaks English and lives in Ontario. This combination of features helps us to rebuild the place from where the author writes this novel and her representation about her canadianness. The position that Atwood holds within the English-speaking Canadian literary tradition and her influence as a writer in the development of the national identity in Canadian literature are fundamental in this work.

The picture that Atwood portrays of Canada is not unjustified or naïve. In fact, it comes from a peculiar form of looking at her birthplace that helps her to construct her understanding of Canadian identity. In this sense, any identification in respect to what is national is an ideological construction based on knowledge, instilled concepts and customs, and it is always defined in relation to others: her border neighbours and the rest of the international community.

Howells (1996) holds that the image that Canada projects to the outside world is of a bilingual and multicultural nation and of a place where its narratives build the image of the "new world" where cultural differences have their own place in Canadian literature. Canada has been historically defined in relation to its European mothers, France and Great Britain, and to its southern neighbour: the U.S. This bond, apart from its political history, turns Canada into a nation that adopts many cultural assumptions as its own and at the same time redefines them by providing its own elements which, in the end, results into something new.

The history of Canada is peculiar since it is a rising nation in a process of change from a colonial to a postcolonial state. It is interesting to observe that there is a plurality of voices that converge in a political discourse in which the debates between the English and French speaking communities are amplified by the various voices that represent different regions, ethnicities, immigrant groups and aborigine peoples and which have implications in the narrative evolution of national identity.

In this way, understanding the nation portrayed by Atwood is to follow a story of changes and representations which are contradictory at times and date back to the 1960s. These representations are centered in a cultural nationalism which is penetrated by the English heritage and by more complex articulations that consist of the multicultural Canadian differences which are characteristic of the 1980s and 90s.

Along her narrative path, Atwood has written the history of Canada in detail, together with its political crisis and ideological changes and as a novelist devoted to the representation and cultural critique of an on-going national project.

An overview of the development of Feminism and feminist movements

The struggle for women's recognition of their right to work, be educated and participate in the political organization of a nation can be traced back to the eighteenth century, more specifically to the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth. There is a common misunderstanding that women have always been excluded from the economic life of society and are only now reluctantly and gradually admitted into the masculine sphere of work. This is a misrepresentation of facts. According to the British psychologist and feminist writer Viola Klein (1984, 521) "Before the agricultural and industrial revolution there was hardly any job which was not also performed by women". This has to do with the economy of that time, society was not rich enough, and the methods of production were rudimentary and not sufficiently effective to let women stay at home taking care of their children. Moreover, marriage was not a life insurance for economic sustenance and social stability; in fact, it was regarded as a necessity for all, both man and woman for their personal fulfillment and their economic benefit.

The industrial age brought about profound changes in women's social and economic life. Klein states that "growing industrialization transferred more and more productive activities from the home to the factory" (521) and machines relieved women of a great part of their household duties. Consequently, women were not considered as contributors to the family income anymore, particularly in the middle classes, so the responsibility of providing for the needs of the family now devolved upon men. From then on women's personal happiness, social status and economic prosperity depended upon marriage, which undoubtedly caused a change in the expectations of any girl at that time. Klein refers to these women as "struggling in her main pursuit of captivating a husband" (522).

There was a great difference between the women belonging to the middle classes or the new proletariat and the ones belonging to the higher classes. While the former received low wages at the factories and were robbed of their economic usefulness, the latter were educated to be accomplished ladies whose idleness gave prestige to the man of the family. Under these circumstances many more voices were clamoring for equal opportunities and higher education among working women. They started to fight for equality, improved educational facilities and differential treatment at work. Several Acts were passed in Britain looking for the betterment of working conditions for women and children and paving the way for a change in the perception people had of poverty. According to Klein, "The poverty of the poor and also the subjection of women were no longer considered as irremediable natural states, but as a result of social institutions for which Man and not God was responsible" (525). This radical change helped women to realize that they were able to fight for their rights and against their poverty, disease and degrading situation.

The feminist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries offered a wide-ranging critique of society; both became engaged in a fundamental reexamination of the role of women in all spheres of life. According to British feminist writers Judith Hole and

Ellen Levine (1984, 533) these early and contemporary movements "have defined women as an oppressed group and have traced the origin of women's subjugation to male-defined and male-dominated social institutions and value systems". Women started to stand up for their rights; however, there was one right that stood out over the others: the right to vote. The National American Woman Suffrage Association was founded in 1890 by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton who later on founded "The Revolution", one of the best known independent women's newspaper. They assumed as their first priority the drive for women's suffrage but they also examined the institutions of marriage, the law and organized religion. Moreover, the newspaper touched incendiary topics as the double standard and prostitution. This suffrage organization used different tactics in their campaigns for suffrage: lecture tours, lobbying activities, petition campaigns and submitting the case in courts. After years of fighting, the Woman Suffrage Amendment (known as the 'Anthony Amendment'), introduced into every session of Congress from 1878 on, was finally ratified on August 26, 1920. After this major accomplishment, the women's movement virtually died and remained asleep for forty years.

Feminine, Female, Feminist

The Norwegian feminist writer Toril Moi distinguishes among three terms in her essay "Feminist, Female, Feminine" (1997). The first term is a political label that indicates support for the aims of the new women's movement which emerged in the late 1960s. Feminist criticism, then, is a specific kind of political discourse which in Moi's words is a "critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism" (104). Feminist criticism has to do with the study of the social, institutional and personal power relations between the sexes; the task of feminist critics and theorists is to expose the way in which male dominance over females (a simple definition for patriarchy) constitutes perhaps "the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (104). Every single idea, including feminist ones, are in this sense "contaminated" by patriarchal ideology; that is why, it is extremely difficult to deviate from the norm and find a voice totally devoid of patriarchal content. However, it is important to mention that the very fact of being 'female' (the second term Moi defines in her essay) does not necessarily guarantee a feminist approach; at the same time, not all books written by women on women writers exemplify anti-patriarchal commitment.

In *Surfacing*, Atwood projects a strong political dimension on the book which is related to her condition as a woman. What does it mean to write as a woman? How does the language decode cultural and ideological changes? In looking at this profile, we can assure that one of the biggest challenges for a feminine writer is to know which is her commitment to the definition that society holds of "women" and which is the place she occupies in the debates about what is to be 'feminine' and 'feminist'. *The Edible Woman* is another novel by Atwood in which the development of North American postwar feminism is portrayed.

According to Howells, Atwood, "registered the first signs of the contemporary women's movement in its resistance to social myths of femininity" (39). This novel is an imaginative transformation of a social issue into a comic satire since its protagonist is a young woman who rebels against her feminine destiny. The book goes beyond the typical anger and frustration of women because it intends to portray the absurdity of social conventions through laughter. It is more a type of subversive rather than a confronting novel which adopts the ways of a revisionist parody about manners and the obsession with the issue of marriage. These topics are later on revisited by many other North American feminist authors such as Betty Friedan, Susan Sontag and Alice Munro.

Feminism has to do not only with writing from a feminine perspective but also with women fighting against patriarchal ideology. It also refers to gender, to our cultural building as feminine or masculine in society. Kate Millet, in her well known book entitled *Sexual Politics* (1969), explains how power relations work and how men manipulate and perpetuate their dominance over women. The feminist cause tries to undo the patriarchal empire and Literature, as an institution, serves the purpose of reflecting this struggle. Atwood explores sexual power in almost all her work by tracing the social myths of femininity and by addressing the problems of representation faced by a woman writer. According to Howells, Atwood plays with the double meaning of 'subject', women as writing subjects and women's exclusion from subjecthood when the female body becomes the subject of patriarchal discourse.

Atwood reflects in her work the suffering and quest of every woman to come to terms with their female condition: searching for their identity, fighting against preconceived role models and looking for a respectable place in society. Our task is to disentangle some of the main ideological assumptions that make Atwood a feminist writer icon of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Subalternity and Feminism

The question 'Can the subaltern speak?' and a tentative answer to this question should not be taken lightly since the argument points to the structural silencing of the subaltern in the historical capitalist narrative. This question, first introduced by Indian thinker and critic Gayatri Spivak (1942), has become archetypical in contemporary social theory. It is not our interest to expand exhaustively on Spivak's work and her theory of subalternity. We will only refer to those concepts that can be useful in the analysis of the female protagonist of *Surfacing* in order to examine whether this character is, in fact, a subaltern subject.

In the essay "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988), Spivak makes clear that the subaltern subject can 'speak' in physical terms; however, his/her talking does not acquire a dialogic status; in other words, the subaltern is not a subject who occupies a discursive position from where he/she can speak or respond. In this sense, the adoption of the concept

‘subaltern’, coined by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), evokes a historic subject with its own gender characteristics and ethnicity. The mark that characterizes this group responds to their condition of being oppressed and their inability to ‘speak’; for example, the proletariat, women, farmers, and aborigine communities are often related to this group. The research carried out by Spivak results from the analysis of the relationship between the individual subject and domination; in fact, domination that has to do with conscience, subjectivity, intentionality and the identity that emerges from this relationship. Given that she is commonly associated with a poststructuralist school of thought, Spivak’s main objectives are to de-center the subject and highlight the idea that the person who has freedom of will is an ideological construction that responds to a cultural and social specific situation. Spivak mentions two main difficulties to answer her initial question. Firstly, she observes that the subaltern subject cannot speak because he/she does not have a place that allows him/her to. Secondly, Spivak holds that women are subalterns because of their double condition of being women and colonial subjects. The concept of feminism finds in Spivak’s theory a breeding ground to rethink some categories. From this perspective, the subaltern woman is a silent subject and a testimony that the feminine conscience is silent as well. The problem does not lie in the fact that women cannot speak but in the idea that their voice does not take part in hegemonic discourse. So, what would be the medium through which women could be heard?

In Spivak’s work, the analysis of the problem between the relationship of the subject and domination is emphasized from four different aspects: conscience, subjectivity, intentionality and the identity that emerges from this relationship. The author, who follows the concepts expressed by Michel Foucault in his book about Gilles Deleuze’s theories (1987), argues for the decentering and deconstruction of the sovereign subject which is the historical European subject who does not recognize any geopolitical boundary. Spivak believes that intellectuals should not and cannot speak ‘for’ the subaltern since this implies protecting and reinforcing the concept of subalternity and oppression. She tries to decenter the subject by highlighting the idea that this individual, who is usually a man and has freedom of will, is an ideological construction that responds to a specific cultural, political, historical and social situation and which is not applicable to all ages, societies or places.

“The subaltern cannot speak and if he/she does it, they will stop being subaltern”. These words summarize Spivak’s most well-known text on postcolonial studies. The subaltern is someone who finds himself/herself in an inferior condition with respect to another person. Subalternity is something more than a form of oppression that excludes subjects in a determined cultural way. The subaltern does not have any representation, s/he can speak but nobody listens to them. If there is any kind of representation, it is based on the representative agenda.

The purpose of this work is to portray the protagonist as a subaltern subject and how this condition moves her to begin a journey that will eventually become a rite of passage. The rite will liberate her from her subaltern condition. The following subsection pretends to explain and refer to some theoretical notions about rites of passage.

Rites of Passage in the modern novel

According to C. J. Jung (2009, 12), "the Archetype is an unconscious mental content or a way of archaic behavior that has universal characteristics. An archetype is expressed in variable forms in every individual conscience."¹ In 1949, American mythologist, writer and lecturer Joseph Campbell drew on this concept to postulate the existence of a pattern that is actually repeated in almost all tribes and religions of the world. In the book *The Hero with the Thousand Faces* (1949), he was referring to the 'Rite of Passage' which is the path that an initiated must go through in order to change from one state to another. The initiated is the 'chosen one', meaning that he was chosen to be the 'hero'. In general, the path that the initiated must go through consists in beginning a journey that will lead him to become a wise person. After he comes back from the journey, the initiated shares his knowledge with the rest of the tribe. In Campbell's words, the hero "is that man or woman who has been able to fight against and triumph over his/her own local, historic and personal limitations and the one who has achieved general, valid and normal human ways."²(1949, 19)

The myth of the hero's adventures presents a structure that derives from a distant paradigmatic model which has been established in culture at some point in history. Campbell states that the first mission for a hero is to move away from the world to the causal zones of the psych, where the truth resides. His job is to find the truth and clarify it. The second mission is to go back to his birthplace turned into a different person and teach the lessons he has learnt about life.

Even though Campbell centers his theory on legends and myths, he invites us to draw a parallelism between those archetypes and the modern novel. The strict and sacramental rigidity that characterizes the rite of passage is counteracted by the desacralized situations of the modern novel. Moreover, the initiation of the novel hero happens to be in solitude, detached from the ones who have been initiated as well.

Chilean lecturer and critic Juan Villegas, in his book *The Mythical Structure of the Hero in the XX Century Novel* (1973), recapitulated the myths that Campbell explores in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) with the intention of schematizing the heroic adventure; however, Villegas added some important novel points. He postulates the existence of mythical structures that are originated in certain cultures and which are recognized from a certain associative background, which is of mental and universal nature.

It is possible to say that the rite of passage through a journey is one of the many topics found in myths, on which literary works have been inspired along history. In this sense, Villegas argues that myth topics "are meaningful cores that work as minimum structural units with symbolic content"³ (Villegas 1973, 120). Writers can draw on these topics to model or build their narrations. They choose, translate or reinterpret myth topics in order to reaffirm or parody them.

¹ My own translation

² My own translation

³ My own translation

Villegas proposes a structural scheme of myth topics which are recurrent in rites of passage and which are also functional for the analysis in the updating of myths in the modern novel. The structure consists in three basic instances of the journey the hero takes and each of them has different myth topics:

1) *The life of the non-initiated:*

- a) The call for adventure: the hero discovers that reality is fake; there is something that unsettles him.
- b) Towards the awakening of the hero: the master or somebody else encourages the hero to abandon what is familiar and known to him.
- c) The journey: it is an unsettling tour with findings that arouses the hero's curiosity. It is the stage of the 'awakening'.
- d) The crossing of the threshold: it is the abandonment of what is known.

2) *The initiation per se. The acquisition of experience:*

- a) The journey: it is the fundamental part of the initiation process. It can be an exterior journey (outside the subject) or an interior journey (to the world of dreams).
- b) The encounter: the hero will find people who oppose his journey
- c) The night experience: a fundamental requirement of the rite is the actual abandonment of the initiated in a dark and deserted place. Only by overcoming this stage will the hero confirm his bravery.
- d) The fall and descent into hell: the hero stays in the darkness for a while; it means the marginalization of life and the return.
- e) Death and rebirth: it is to overcome the fall into hell.

3) *The life of the initiated. Triumph and failure of the hero:*

- a) The return: the hero feels the need to return to his own environment with a message he wants to share with his people.
- b) The denial from coming back: the hero cannot abandon his new status.
- c) The crossing of the threshold when returning.
- d) The possession of both worlds: it is a certain degree of conscience that arises from a learning process that makes the world a more understanding place.

According to the characterization proposed by Villegas, the myth topic of the call arises from a 'discovery'; there is something that unsettles the hero. The absurdity of the world is revealed and the protagonist, who is bewildered, starts looking for answers and, inevitably, takes off in search of them. The questions that push the hero towards the adventure spring from a questioning to his own existence. This process of self-discovery is frequently present in the novels of the twentieth century, and it is what we will try to find out in *Surfacing*.

Atwood's novel is divided into three thick chapters (which are at the same time subdivided) that coincide with the three key moments that the hero has to go through in a rite of passage. Following this scheme, our analysis will also be divided into three sections.

First Stage: The Life of the non-initiated

As regards the structure of the novel, Atwood does not give titles to the main chapters but numbers: one, two and three. We believe that this responds to two reasons: first, the author intensifies the idea of a story that evolves, which we follow step by step as if it were a story in which we should not skip any chapter. This decision of not entitling any chapter implies that the whole narration hides certain information that will not be revealed until we immerse ourselves in it. Moreover, this decision also positions us as active readers since we will have to work the whole narration out.

The second reason derives from the first one. The idea that something is not mentioned is also present in the protagonist because she does not have a name either. What does Atwood want to convey when she decides to give a name to all the characters of the story except for the main one?

In order to answer this question we need to draw on the concepts of feminism and subalternity reviewed before. The protagonist does not have an identity because her name has been taken away; there is no way of naming her, just by a pronoun: SHE. The fact that she does not have a name reinforces her subaltern nature and at the same time it is difficult to grant her an identity. Who is this woman who travels in search of her missing father with

three other people by car on a Canadian highway? And when she speaks in the first person we cannot make her our own; that is to say, identify her. Whatever the protagonist says does not have any authority because the capacity of defining herself has been denied to her. At the same time, we start wondering about the protagonist's past.

The first image that Atwood gives of this character is that of a foreigner lost in her own space, somebody who does not recognize that place as her own anymore. We are in front of somebody who has been abandoned to the familiar, cultural and metaphysical destitution: "Nothing is the same, I don't know the way anymore. (...) I want to turn round and go back to the city and never find out what happened to him" (Atwood, 16).

The space is presented as chaotic at first. It is a place that used to belong to her in the past but now she finds it unfamiliar and she is trying to organize it with the help of her memories and the images that the present time offers. In this way, the space takes unknown dimensions and becomes a favorable place for the initiated journey of the protagonist: "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." (7)

Surfacing is narrated in the first person; it is the protagonist that becomes the spokesperson of her own mythical journey. From this perspective, we understand and analyze the character in her heroic condition. In the novel, each element turns into a symbol and every situation into a rite to be accomplished. That is why the protagonist's lack of proper name is also a key element to understand her own confusing nature.

In this sense, Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) helps us understand more about the category of the hero. From a Bakhtinian perspective (see Bakhtin 1985, 2002), the character reveals her condition as a heroine when she becomes the spokesperson of her own mythical journey of initiation. If the character is successful in understanding the forces that rule her world, in revealing her conscience and, at the same time, in realizing who she really is, she is elevated to the category of heroine. According to Bakhtin (2002), the hero of a novel works as a main concept that organizes the argument in the literary work. The hero's configuration depends heavily on the argument since the hero is a semantic core that articulates the ethical and cognitive planes with the artistic one in a literary work. That is why Bakhtin conceives the hero as the bearer of values of a certain time period. All these concepts are intertwined in the protagonist. Throughout the novel, she is able to control the outside forces that upset her and later on she is capable of understanding them. This emotional process allows her to make peace with her father's shadow and 'surface' as a person who is aware of her own conscience and her surroundings.

The main character is also a reflection of her own time. Her eyes perceive the world that surrounds her as a poetic experience which is understood as something to be expected. The whole journey is about finding something which justifies the existence of things. In relation to this, Villegas points out that the concept of hero is dynamic and volatile because it adapts to the conception of man and world that are conceived in every historic time (181).

Thinking that the characters portrayed in Homer's epic poems are the only ones who deserve to be called 'heroes' reveals a restricted and limited vision of the world of literature and the role of heroes along literary history. This view also reveals the misconception that heroes have only lived in past times. That is why Villegas tries to demonstrate that in the modern novel, there is a tendency to portray the hero as somebody who, instead of being elevated above the rest, lives dominated and beaten up by his surroundings or the social structures of his/her times. Moreover, Campbell believes that a hero is that man or woman who has been able to fight against and triumph over his/her own personal and local historical limitations and who has achieved a human form which is valid and regular.

In the novel, the protagonist's change becomes evident at one point during the journey. She discovers the impact that the changes in time and space have caused on her. Reality has also changed and the character feels that she is entering into a new space, a kind of death and a subsequent resurrection. The heroine sinks into the adventure of knowing herself better and the proclamation of that other person who lives in herself. As Campbell argues

"The mythological hero walks out from her hut or castle, he is attracted to, driven by or moves voluntarily towards the threshold of the adventure. Beyond the threshold, the hero walks through a world with unfamiliar forces which, at the same time, threaten him dangerously or give him magic help. When he gets to the end of his mythological journey, he has to get over a final test and the hero finally receives his reward which is the expansion of his conscience and therefore of the self. The final work is the return. At the threshold of the return, the transcendental forces must stay behind, the hero emerges from the kingdom of affliction. The good that he brings with him restores the entire world." (140)

From the moment that the mythical journey begins, the spokesperson and the center of the narrative are the protagonist and the encounter she will have with herself and the other person that lives in her. *Surfacing* tells the events that take place in one week which eventually will be a passage from adulthood to misfortune but at the same time to wisdom and understanding. This passage must be understood as the commitment to seek the real woman behind the protagonist's facade.

It is interesting to notice that the other characters who join the protagonist in the search for her father do have names: Anna, Joe and David. Joe is her boyfriend and the other two are a friend married couple. The group goes with the heroine to the north of Quebec, towards the old family house which is on an island in one of the many Canadian lakes. They travel with her barely knowing the reason for such a journey. For them, it's just an adventure, a weekend break:

"They're doing me a favor, which they disguised by saying it would be fun, they like to travel. But my reason for being here embarrasses them, they don't understand it. They all disowned their parents long ago, the way you supposed to: Joe never mentions his mother and father, Anna says hers were nothing people and David calls his The Pigs." (Atwood: 13).

The attitude that the rest of the characters have highlights the distance they feel towards their ancestors. This attitude helps the protagonist to revise and order her memories

and at the same time she designs and presents her vision of the story, her story. However, how can anyone reorder his/her memories when the present time is so confusing? The protagonist arrives at her home town without any information of his missing father. He just simply disappeared and an acquaintance gives her no information whatsoever:

“He is just gone”, he says. “I go there one day to see him, the door is open, the boat is there, I think maybe he is off somewhere near and I wait awhile. Next day I go back, everything the same, I begin to worry, where he is, I don’t know” (18).

The search is not easy, nobody in town gives her further information and she feels that the members of the community are watching and judging her because of her female condition:

“Your husband here too? he asks irrelevantly. “Yes, he’s here,” I say, skipping over the lie even in my own mind. What he means is that a man should be handling this; Joe will do as a stand-in. My status is a problem, they obviously think I’m married. But I’m safe, I’m wearing my ring, I never threw it out, it’s useful for landlords. I sent my parents a postcard after the wedding, they must have mentioned it to Paul; that, but not the divorce. It isn’t part of the vocabulary here, there’s no reason to upset them” (19).

This quote reflects all the repression that the protagonist is feeling. She is the one who has to build her own net of lies to keep her safe from those eyes that look at her full of accusation and reproach. Moreover, she considers herself as a foreigner in her own hometown where French is spoken. The people who live in the area stress her foreign condition:

“The woman looks at me, inquisitive but not smiling, and two men still in Elvis Presley haircuts, duck’s ass at the back and greased pompadours curving out over their foreheads, stop talking and look at me, too (...) “Avez-vous du viandehaché?” I ask her, blushing because of my accent. 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” (22).

The differences between her and her surroundings are clear. Throughout the reading we can notice a tense atmosphere between the main character and the local people; moreover, being a woman does not help to bridge the gap that exists between them. Women have a socially constructed role in this particular space, they are perceived as a homogenous group without taking into account their differences: “There used to be only one store. It was in the front part of a house, ran by an old woman who was also called Madame: none of the women had names then” (Surfacing, 23). In this quote Atwood shows us how women are perceived in some areas of Canada. It is clear that they have very limited possibilities, expectations and opportunities in this highly conservative area. At the same time, certain ways of behaving that do not conform to the norm are rejected under the label of “dangerous behavior”. That is why the protagonist and her friends are perceived as strangers and not accepted by the local community:

“We find out from Claude we can hire Evans, who owns the Blues Moon Cabins, to run us down the lake. Paul would take us for nothing, he offered, but I wouldn’t feel right about it; also I’m sure he would misinterpret Joe’s amorphous beard and David’s

moustache and Three Musketeers hair. They're just a style now, like crew cuts, but Paul might feel they are dangerous, they mean riots. (25).

Once the group arrives to the island, they decide to settle in the cabin where the protagonist used to live during her childhood. Both, the house and the island are equally important elements in the novel because they will favor the rite of passage the protagonist will go through. Besides, they provide the main character with multiple dichotomies: between the old and the new, her ancestors and her present time, the rustic surroundings and the city and finally between her friends and herself. Everything revolves around these two places which at the same time push the protagonist to look for answers. According to Campbell, the place where the hero was born or accomplished his feats is pointed out as sacred since this is the place where the actual journey begins (78). That is why, the hero's family surroundings help him to meditate upon his life and afflictions and this is what our protagonist is going to do.

We should notice all the symbols that are encompassed in the image of the island. The author chooses an island, the iconic symbol of isolation and loneliness, as the space where the protagonist begins a journey to the self. On the island, the protagonist fights against her inner forces: her childhood and the present time, her parents and brother and her partner and friends. The island that Atwood describes in the novel is a hostile place. The protagonist starts fighting with the island from the moment she stamps a foot on it. The house is in ruins, the orchard is destroyed, the wood of the dock is rotten and black flies chase the group wherever they go. This situation is exemplified in the first attempt the group makes in search for the protagonist's father:

"We swing away from the shore and here it's a jungle, branches growing in across the path, hazel and moose maple, pithy junk trees (...) I stand aside and David hacks at the wall with his machete, not very well: he tatters and bends rather than slicing." (46)

Days start passing by and the group seems to be having some fun. They sunbathe, read, or try to play some table games. However, the protagonist is unsettled; she cannot enjoy the stay like the rest of her friends. She feels that somebody or something is watching her; however her friends cannot notice it. There is somebody out there. There are no footprints, no noises or traces; it is just a feeling that the protagonist cannot avoid. A kind of contradiction lies in here. Although she travels to the island to find her missing father, we have the impression that she does not want to find him:

"Show me how to light the lamp," Anna says, "I'll stay here and read." "I don't want to leave her alone. What I'm afraid of is my father, hidden on the island somewhere and attracted by the light perhaps, looming up at the window like a huge moth; or, if he's still at all lucid, asking her who she is and ordering her out of his house. As long as there are four of us he'll keep away, he never liked groups." (59)

This attitude on the part of the main character is something new to the reader: she is afraid of her father. Moreover, this fear grows along the narration and the reader does not

have a full understanding of that father-daughter relationship. We can also say that fear acts here as a double mechanism: first, it acts as something that cannot be described or named: – “...the island wasn’t safe, we were trapped on it. They didn’t realize it but I did, I was responsible for them” (76)-. And second, after analyzing the protagonist’s moves, gestures and internal dialogues we might notice that fear is the motivation for all her actions: “I wanted to keep busy, preserve at least the signs of order, and conceal my fear, both from others and from him. Fear has a smell, as love does.” (77) Consequently, this emotion can be understood, in terms of Sartre (1973), as a way of perceiving the world. According to Sartrean existentialism, fear is intrinsic to every human being. That is to say, any person may live in this world without love, hope or will; however, fear will always be present. As a human constitutive element, fear can work in two ways: either it paralyzes me by transforming myself into a passive subject or it makes me take action on the different matters of my life. In the case of the protagonist, she first runs away from what she fears but later on that same fear works as a mobilizing element of change. The narrator reflects upon her fears (her father and her female condition) so as to become a new metaphysical being. In Sartre’s words, she faces her fears from a reflexive point of view to be able to confront all the ghosts from the past.

Second stage: The Initiation per se

Throughout this stage the protagonist will experience the awakening of her conscience. It is the beginning of a process of self-discovery that will take her to a journey to her inner world. Her main concern will be to find out clues inside the cabin that may eventually lead her to her father’s whereabouts. She will also raise questions about herself: who is she? Where is she? Where does she have to go now?

During this stage the protagonist starts searching for clues among her father’s personal belongings: his books, magazines and old drawings. There, she finds a letter written by a professor of a university. He wants to thank his father for having sent information about the discoveries he has made in relation to cave art. This event is crucial for our heroine since she is now convinced that his father’s disappearance is related to his effort in finding signs of ancient civilizations in that remote area of Canada:

“I had the proof now, indisputable, of sanity and therefore of death. Relief, grief, I must have felt one or the other. A blank, a disappointment: crazy people can come back, from wherever they go to take refuge, but dead people can’t, they are prohibited.” (104)

Before this discovery, the protagonist had thought that the main reason why his father was missing was his mental insanity.

However, this discovery is not enough. She needs to see something else, to contrast what she feels inside with the real world; that is why she needs to begin another journey. In order to accomplish this mission, the protagonist gathers the group and invites them to go on a boat trip to the islands that are nearby. The group accepts the invitation gladly but she conceals the reason behind that trip once more: she wants to see by herself what his father has been into. According to Campbell (1949), the hero’s process of initiation takes place after a series of experiences that leads him to the search for the real self. This is exactly what the protagonist is doing since her journey does not merely consist in travelling from one place to the other but in embarking herself on a trip

to her deepest thoughts and emotions. Campbell refers to this state as "the whale belly" and Villegas (116) defines it as the time that the hero stays in darkness and marginalized from life:

"Okay," he said. "I give up, you win. We'll forget everything I said and do it like you want, back to the way it was before, right?" It was too late, I couldn't. "No" I said. I had already moved out." (125)

In this passage, Joe (her boyfriend) gives her the chance of starting everything from scratch; he wants to help her find her father the way she prefers. Nevertheless, she has already made a decision: she does not belong to this world anymore; she has moved to the dark side of her mind. The protagonist is now looking for answers inside her and she is totally isolated from the ones who surround her.

The journey is not successful since they fail to find the paintings. However, the trip is not entirely futile: the protagonist becomes aware of the special bond she has with nature. The environment that seems to be hostile for the rest of the group turns into a refuge for her. The communion between the protagonist and nature will be celebrated soon but at this point she gives us some clues about this special bond when she finds a dead heron:

"I felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands as though I had been there and watched without saying NO or doing anything to stop it (...) The trouble some people have being German, I thought, I have being human." (131)

From now on nature becomes the central force that triggers the protagonist's internal changes. Nature will help her to discover who she really is and to answer all the questions that remained in the dark until today. She denies her human condition and becomes part of a world ruled by natural forces. According to Campbell, whenever an element, such as nature, becomes central in a novel it becomes ubiquitous as well. He believes that it turns into the source of all existence and it provides peace and love, beauty and ugliness, sin and virtue as well as pleasure and pain (32). In Campbell's words nature in this case would be the *omphalos*⁴, the centre where everything turns into two and it is ruled by opposites.

As the story progresses the communion between the protagonist and nature becomes real and the initiation is consummated. As readers, we witness the precise moment in which the initiation begins: when she decides to set out on a journey to look for the cave paintings on her own. The protagonist goes back to the rocks that were indicated on the maps that her father left and plunges into the water⁵. This event should not be overlooked; moreover, it gives the novel a symbolic nature. In Christian terms, water is the sign for purity. To baptize means to plunge and during baptism believers rebirth from water. The act of plunging in water is an initiation sign in Christianity that in this particular case acquires

⁴ It is a Greek word that means "umbilicus" or "belly button". Since ancient times, the umbilicus has been identified as the centre of everything.

⁵ Author's Note: The protagonist plunges into the water since she believes that due to the building of a new dam in the area, the water level has risen three metres; consequently, the cave paintings remain underwater.

certain ritual qualities. Campbell explains that the fall of the hero to the darkness always implies the idea of death and rebirth: "Pale green, then darkness, layer after layer, deeper than before, sea bottom" (Atwood: 143). The idea of plunging into one's hell is most of the times the expression of the desire to be born once again which is a distinct characteristic of initiation rites. The essence of the initiation act relies on the abandonment and incorporation of a new state of affairs.

When the hero surfaces from water, everything has changed. The protagonist has abandoned her "otherness". This final process does not imply a division anymore, but the acceptance of the self. She does not fight against her inner forces anymore; she interacts with the other characters as a real, naked and lonely woman: "It's over," he said, "feel better?" I was emptied, amputated; I stank of salt and antiseptic, they had planted death in me like a seed." (Atwood, 145)

According to Campbell, the rite of passage begins when crossing a threshold and at the same time it implies a return. This threshold separates and joins two worlds (the divine and the human, the time and the space, etc.) and signals the beginning of a new life: "When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges gently against the dock." (Atwood, 183) We should also notice the recurrent presence of the lake which will later on allow the reconciliation between the protagonist and her past, her parents and finally herself. The images portrayed in the novel such as plunging, floating and swimming are all related to water as a purifying element. At the same time, we can draw a parallelism between the protagonist plunging in the lake and diving in her own subconscious. Atwood gives an explanation for this parallelism, she says "drowning...can be used as a metaphor for a descent into the unconscious" (184) since our repressed memories are freed and we can experience a rebirth and a rediscovery of our own identity.

The Third Stage: The life of the initiated

So far we have witnessed the narrator's transformation when trying to make her voice be heard. Up to this moment, her voice had been silenced by the physical and symbolic force of the men that surrounded her. She experiences the violence that is projected by the male characters of the novel:

"He kissed me; I stood on my side of the window. When his head drew away I said "I don't love you," I was going to explain but he didn't seem to hear me (...) he was pushing on me as though trying to fold up a lawn chair, he wanted me to lie down on the ground (...) At the moment I thought, perhaps for him I am the entrance, as the lake was the entrance for me. The forest condensed in him, it was noon, the sun was behind his head; his face was invisible, the sun's rays coming out from a center of darkness, my shadow." (147)

However, unlike past times, the protagonist envisions the darkness inside her and she is aware of her own subalternity; that is why, the rite of passage was possible to be carried out. Joe symbolizes the oppressive male gender who subjugates women's voices. At first, the narrator depicts Joe as simple-minded and agreeable, but as *Surfacing* progresses, Joe's personality undergoes changes: where once he seemed content, he becomes irritable and sullen.

She also suffers an abusive situation on the part of her friend David. The following quote signals the feminist tone that Atwood wants to give to the novel:

“His fingers were squeezing, he was drawing away some of the power, I would lose it and come apart again, the lies would recapture. “Please don't,” I said. “Come on now, don't give me a hassle,” he said. “You're a groovy chick, you know the score, you aren't married.” He reached his arm around me, invading, and pulled me over towards him; (...) “Why are you doing this?” I said. “You're interfering.” (152)

David is the model of male dominance in *Surfacing*. He initially appears to be an ideal husband, as he jokes and flirts with his wife Anna. However, Atwood twists her portrayal of David by revealing the cruelty that underscores his jokes and the emptiness of his flirtation with his wife. In the previous quote, David is trying to have sex with the narrator; however, she rejects him provoking his anger and resentment towards women. The narrator is treated as an object once more.

The third chapter signals the end of *Surfacing* and reveals the mystery of the protagonist's father's death. Finally, his body is found at the bottom of the lake with his skull broken and a camera around his neck. The initial hypothesis points out that her father has fallen from a cliff and the weight of the camera prevented him from coming out to the surface. The police arrive to the island and communicate this finding to Anna and David who later on tell it to the narrator. As we may very well expect, she does not believe them and thinks they are lying to see her suffering. After this shocking situation, the protagonist begins to experience hallucinations in which she thinks her father is still alive. These delusions go together with a surreal metamorphosis since she feels herself deeply identified with nature to the point of seeing herself as an animal.

The sequence of events goes at fast speed towards the end of the novel. In front of the rest of the characters, the protagonist gets on the boat and vanishes. Right after, her friends start looking for her; however, she does not want to be seen. Moreover, the boat that will take them to land has just arrived so Anna, David and Joe decide to leave the island. Unlike her friends, she decides to stay on the island alone. The same place that used to be insecure and frightening is now her refuge: “but to go with them would have been running away, the truth is here.” (174). She feels now lonely and desperate and it is only through the reality distorted by her hallucinations that she can cope with the decisions she has made so far.

During this confusing time, she begins to question the nature of her anguish and at the same time she feels the need of getting rid of everything she possesses even her own clothes. All rites of passage imply a process of purification that allows the rebirth of a new

metaphysical being. As readers we could notice this process when the protagonist plunges into the water and also when she thinks she has turned into an animal: "Everything from history must be eliminated, the circles and the arrogant square pages." (Atwood, 181-182)

There are two different worlds coexisting in *Surfacing*. There is one in which the protagonist experiences real-like events, such as travelling to the island, going fishing, searching for her father, etc. And there is another one, which converges to the former that portrays what is purely existential, subjective and psychological. It is the world in which the hero's rite of passage takes place and where the hero experiences madness, temporary dislocations of time and delusions. Moreover, this world witnesses the transformation of the protagonist into an animal. In order to achieve her new condition she decides to destroy all her belongings, tear up her clothes and sleep out in the open. By being naked and sleeping in the bushes, the process of turning into an animal is a fact:

"They can't be trusted. They'll mistake me for a human being, a naked woman wrapped in a blanket: possibly that's what they've come here for, if it's running around loose, ownerless, why not take it. They won't be able to tell what I really am." (189)

During these delusions in which she has turned into an animal, the protagonist sees her father. She wants to come to terms with him and finally be at peace:

"He is standing near the fence with his back to me, looking at the garden (...) I say Father (...) I see now that although it isn't my father it is my father who has become. I knew he wasn't dead (...) I watch it for an hour or so; then it drops and softens, the circles widen, it becomes an ordinary fish again. (193)

This revelation gives the protagonist her real identity back. There is an authentic acceptance of pain and death which allows her to grow as a person. The two previous coexisting worlds become one. The experience of adventure gives her the knowledge that allows her to understand the real world.

After the encounter she has with her father's animal like appearance (a fish), the main character turns into her original anthropomorphic condition:

"I drop the blanket on the floor and go into my dismantled room. My spare clothes are here, knife slashes in them but I can still wear them. I dress, clumsily, unfamiliar, with buttons; I reenter my own time. But I bring with me from the distant past five nights ago the time-traveler, the primaverl one who will have to learn, shape of a goldfish now with my belly, undergoing its watery changes." (197)

The rite of passage has finished, the two worlds have joined and become one. The hero has come back to his primary time. According to Villegas the rite of passage leads the characters to a pre-established way of living; however, this does not imply that the hero carries a message of salvation to the members of the community he/she takes belongs to (176). On the contrary, some heroes do not contribute with anything new; they just go through a process of transformation. In a poetic act the protagonist says her last words " If I die it dies, if I starve it starves with me. I might be the first one, the first true human; it must be born, allowed." (198)

Conclusion

Feminism – Subalternity – Rite of Passage: we have analyzed a major work of Canadian literature of the seventies under these three categories. We attempted to hypothesize that within a socio-historic framework signaled by debates about subalternity and feminism, the protagonist plays the role of a distressed character that is in search of her own personal and cultural identity which is shaped in a rite of passage. That is why we needed to analyze the protagonist's journey.

The novel proposes a fragmented world where different aspects of reality coexist. The text does not clearly show what is real and what is not, depicting a radical indetermination of the real. The conjunction of time and spaces and the intern permeability of possible worlds as if they were part of the same alchemic process show a chaotic reality in constant change where nothing is completely clear. Besides, the tripartite structure of the novel reveals the protagonist's fragmentation. This is reflected in the novel since the first and third chapters are narrated in the present tense while the second one is narrated in the past tense instead. During this section all her memories come together in her mind and emerge to the surface.

The process of initiation of the hero has been backed up by different assimilation stages of her own condition that entail the search and acknowledgement of her own identity. That is why we decided to analyze the encounter between the protagonist and her memories and elements of the past. This is a precise place, an *omphalos*, a space that works as an important stage of the rite to be carried out.

The concept of subalternity is present in the novel. The dialogic position that the protagonist adopts reveals gender traces and ethnicity which give us the image of a subaltern subject. Her voice is hardly ever heard along the narration (she is the character that speaks least of all); besides, her female condition and the fact that she is a colonial subject contribute to her inability to speak. Her voice cannot be heard since she has been pushed to the margins of this colonial world. That is why, her rite of passage is carried out through facts and not words. Moreover, the fact that she chooses to escape from her friends and hide in the bushes shows another sign of her subaltern position.

The protagonist's obsession towards her father's whereabouts is of major importance in the novel. She strongly believes that he is alive lurking behind the bushes. We can say that, at this point, she is completely disoriented and in need of a rebirth journey so she can truly understand this new system of values that oppresses her.

Water is a key element in the novel and has a double meaning. On the one hand, it separates them from the rest of the world as they are on an island and need other people to go there and rescue them. On the other hand, it is an element that symbolizes communion. The heroine's rite of passage is carried out in the water and she leaves her old being in it.

Atwood explores the wild side of the human being through her main character. Here, this woman is forced to commit herself to a reaffirmation process when external circumstances destroy her own version of herself. Consequently, her "madness" is nothing

but her need to reevaluate the prejudices and beliefs that she has about herself. In this way, Atwood challenges the western way of perceiving and approaching nature and also society from a psychological, physical and discursive point of view. That is how the rite of passage takes place and the protagonist comes to terms with her own ghosts and family. This whole act helps her to get all the knowledge she needs to find out the true meaning of her own existence which, in Campbell's words, is the final acquisition of wisdom.

Atwood's project coincides with the revision that Gayatri Spivak has made of psychoanalytic feminism. We can state that *Surfacing* belongs to a series of novels that explore topics such as the construction of women's identity as well as the interaction between women and their patriarchal environment. *Surfacing* is a novel that explores many concerns of the XX century: it is about the role of women in a society that has changed for the better but there is still much more to be done. It is about the specificity of being Canadian. It is about a writer who is willing to portray and question society. It is about one's conscience. Atwood raises the voice of women and contributes to the destruction of monolithic certainties and to the construction of a living culture in constant change.

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