

ANALYSIS

Surfacing (1972)

Margaret Atwood

first published in *Lapis* 10 (1984)

In her most highly regarded novel *Surfacing* (1972), the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood defines the character development of her unnamed woman protagonist in a way that accords, so completely it appears by design, with the psychology of Carl Jung.

The story is narrated by a divorced professional woman--an "illustrator"--returning to her childhood home by a lake in the Canadian wilderness, an image of her soul as "blue and cool as redemption."¹ With her are Joe, the man with whom she is living; Anna, her "best woman friend"; and Anna's husband David. In the tradition of psychological allegory, the secondary characters represent projected aspects of the woman's psycho-drama, comparable to what Jung calls "split-off figures" torturing the ego in schizophrenia²: her remembered former husband and Joe reflect stages in the relationship of her ego to her animus; David, who drives the car to the lake, mirrors her own dissociated, polarized consciousness--her head, to use the metaphor traditional in western literature; while Anna, arrested in development by her role as wife, evokes the protagonist's heart as it once was, before dissociation: "...she could be me at sixteen..." (59).

The often hostile interactions of the four main characters, who fail to be true friends, allegorically dramatize the inner conflicts of the protagonist. Simultaneously, they represent the shallowness of modern society: "A little beer, a little pot, some jokes, a little political chitchat, the golden mean: we're the bourgeoisie..." (46). In a brilliant fusion with the title of the novel, they are compared to water skippers on the lake, "surface tension holding them up" (127).

Living on the surface, the protagonist is drawn to the wilderness, that iconic symbol of the unconscious in western literature, especially in North America³. Atwood's view of wilderness as divine is more Eastern than Western with respect to prevailing values⁴, but is in the mainstream of North American literary tradition since Henry Thoreau and Herman Melville, a countercultural heritage exemplified by *Walden*, where the pond is similar to Atwood's lake, and by *Moby-Dick*⁵. The woman in *Surfacing* goes to the wilderness with the conscious motive of searching for her missing father, a traditional form of the quest myth by which the individuation process is dramatized, as is most elaborately exemplified by James Joyce in *Ulysses*.

The comprehensive theme of *Surfacing*, introduced with the metaphor of a tree-killing disease spreading up from the south, is the destruction of nature and the human soul by a rapacious western civilization. The prevailing spirit of Americans is like a disease, though she discovers that Canadians, including herself, are infected too: "...the pervasive menace, the Americans...possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied" (221). She realizes that the life-destroying effects of western civilization, symbolized for her by a traumatic abortion, have dissociated her from her Self: "I'd allowed myself but a head..." (129). "At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head..." (126). "David is like me, I thought, we are the ones that don't know how to love...atrophy of the heart" (161).

The woman had a happy childhood but was conditioned to imitate "the paper dolls they had in the city," like Anna, who says, "I thought I was really a princess and I'd end up living in a castle" (67). The woman herself is illustrating a book of fairy tales, but her princess "looks stupefied rather than filled with wonder" (62). She idealized her husband to such an extent that when he turned out to be "only a normal man" (220), she was bitterly disillusioned and polarized against men, her feminine side and the values of the heart (55). She divorced without coming to terms with her projection of the animus, and in her relationship with Joe she is animus-possessed, a condition often encountered by Jungian analysts such as June Singer: "...she

presents an image of the most unpleasant characteristics which she has unconsciously identified as masculine...”⁶ Ironic role reversal has become so common in North American novels as to be a literary convention of our time. In this instance the woman stereotypes, scapegoats, cares “nothing” about the aborted child, enjoys Joe’s failures and uses him as a sex object: “Everything I value about him seems to be physical” (65); “It’s best when you don’t know them”; “With a paper bag over their head they’re all the same” (79). She illustrates what she hates.

Joe is introduced as a primal male who looks, from her side, like the buffalo on a nickel, “now threatened with extinction” (10). Later, when she is letting him make love to her, she sees him as her shadow: “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, darkness, my shadow” (172). Diving into the lake, an example of what Jung calls “introversion of the conscious mind into the deeper layers of the unconscious psyche,”⁷ she sees a vision of her dead child and is so moved by the experience that she wants to get pregnant and have a baby as a form of redemption and rebirth. As she regresses to become “a natural woman, state of nature” (222), her consciousness grows archetypal and she needs Joe to be, if anything, even more primal than he is: “I lie down, keeping the moon on my left hand and the absent sun on my right... He needs to grow more fur... I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long” (190-191).

Her rebirth is not complete until she dives still deeper, into madness, disappearing in the wilderness until the others, including Joe, leave her there to return to the city. As R. D. Laing puts it,

True sanity entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self competently adjusted to our alienated social reality; the emergence of the “inner” archetypal mediators of divine power, and through this death a rebirth, and the eventual re-establishment of a new kind of ego-functioning, the ego now being the servant of the divine, no longer its betrayer.

The “mediators of divine power” with whom she must reconcile, especially as she anticipates becoming a parent, are her own dead parents, who appear as primordial ghost images of the masculine and the feminine within herself, first her mother in the archetypal garden of the heart, then her father, a rationalist with the eyes of a wolf, who built the fence around the garden. She understands the projections that alienated her from them both: “...their totalitarian innocence was my own” (221). To some extent she overcomes her polarization against men and her shadow when she is able to recognize the masculine within herself and step into her father’s footprints: “I place my feet in them and find that they are my own” (219).

Whether she is pregnant is uncertain, as is the extent of her spiritual regeneration. “I laugh, and a noise comes out like something being killed: a mouse, a bird?” (222) She may have overcome weakness and cowardice at the price of losing her capacity for grace and transcendence, earlier suggested by the image of a slaughtered heron. At the end it is a hopeful sign that Joe comes back for her and calls from the dock, but she is hiding in the garden: “His voice is annoyed: he won’t wait much longer.” If she does not move toward him and try to resolve their conflicts, “...the lake will freeze solid” (220). Already, when she looks in a mirror, her eyes are like ice. Her incompleteness is reflected in the fact that he, her contrasexual self, “is only half formed.” For the first time, she feels some love for him, but she suffers from the paranoia of victimization: “...we will probably fail, sooner or later, more or less painfully. That’s normal, it’s the way it happens now and I don’t know whether it’s worth it or even if I can depend on him, he may have been sent as a trick” (224).

Her future, and that of the potential unborn, depend on whether and how well she can relate to the ordinary Joe.

Notes

¹ *Surfacing* (Popular Library, 1976), 18. This edition is the one most widely read and is cited hereafter by page number in parenthesis.

² “On the Psychogenesis of Schizophrenia,” *Journal of Mental Science* (London), LXXXV, Sept. 1939 (C.W. 3).

³ Atwood demonstrates that this archetypal pattern of action transcends gender. Compare the Freudian Leslie Fiedler, “The Novel and America,” *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Dell, 1966).

⁴ See Roderick Nash, “Old World Roots of Opinion,” *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale, 1967).

⁵ For a Jungian discussion of regression into the depths using Thoreau as an exemplar see Claire Myers Owens, “The Mystical Experience: Facts and Values,” *Main Currents in Modern Thought*, Vol. 23, No. 4, March-April 1967. See also Edward F. Edinger, *Melville’s Moby Dick: A Jungian Commentary* (New Directions, 1978).

⁶ *Boundaries of the Soul: The Practice of Jung’s Psychology* (Anchor Books, 1973), 245.

⁷ *Analytical Psychology: Its Theory and Practice* (Vintage Books, 1970), 41.

⁸ *The Politics of Experience* (Ballantine Books, 1967), 142-43.

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