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Ca' Foscari
Dorsoduro 3246
30123 Venezia

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*: Trauma, Nature and Spirituality

Relatore

Prof.ssa Pia Masiero

Correlatore

Prof.ssa Daniela Ciani

Laureanda

Caterina Tenan

Matricola 836263

Anno Accademico

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter One – A Close Reading of the First Chapter of <i>Surfacing</i>	11
Chapter Two – Trauma: A Possible Interpretive Trajectory?.....	52
Chapter Three – Nature: A Mirror for the Self?.....	81
Chapter Four – Spirituality: A Way Out?	110
Conclusion.....	137
Works Cited.....	141

A Michele

Introduction

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario and she has been loving literature since she was a child. In fact, she started writing poems and plays at the age of six and when she was sixteen she decided she wanted to be a professional writer. Her first poems and articles have been published in the literary journal of the University of Toronto, where she was studying Arts in English. She became famous first as a poet and then writing successful novels, essays, short stories, children's books and literary critiques. She played a relevant role in defining Canada's literary identity. Moreover, she is famous for her feminist ideas and her environmental and political activism. She also taught in many universities in Canada and the USA and she won numerous literary awards. Atwood was shortlisted for the Booker Prize five times, which she won once, and she won the Governor's General Award twice.

Surfacing, which is Atwood's second novel, was first published in 1972 and some autobiographical details may be detected in the story. For example, Atwood's father was an entomologist, like the protagonist's father in *Surfacing*, and Atwood as a child used to follow him during his researches in the forests in Québec. Moreover, Atwood went to school full-time only at the age of 8, because of her father's job and she used to spend a long time in the Canadian bush and travelling by car from Toronto to Québec.

The story takes place on small island immersed in the Canadian bush in the middle of a lake, on the border between Québec and Ontario. The unnamed female protagonist, who is also the narrator of the novel, is travelling by car from the USA to Canada and a couple of friends and her lover are accompanying her. The reason why she is going back to her childhood place is that her father is believed either to be missing or dead.

This journey back home increasingly takes the shape of a journey back in time, as scenes of the narrator's childhood triggered by sensorial experiences start surfacing in her mind and leave her completely overwhelmed. As a consequence, the quest for her father also becomes a quest for her deeper self, since a trauma occurred in her past which she is trying to forget, is forcing its way back into her consciousness. In fact, she fabricates false memories of a wedding and a divorce in order not to think about the abortion she was forced to undergo because she had an affair with her married art professor. She prefers thinking that she left her child to her former husband and she never tells the truth to anybody.

While on the island, the feeling of alienation and estrangement that emerges in her leads her to become silent and cut off the others from her world. The climatic moment occurs when she dives into the lake and she is confronted with the corpse of her father, who drowned while he was trying to take pictures of Indian petroglyphs on rocks. The sight of the dead thing makes her understand she disguised the memory of her abortion and she denied her responsibility for the deed, since she was convinced she was a victim of her lover's desires.

When she reemerges, a process of healing and rebirth takes place and the protagonist starts changing her attitude towards her past. She manages to conceive a second child and the potential new life she is carrying has a healing power on her, since she starts feeling whole again. She also plunges into a state of controlled madness, in which she reaches a state of communion with nature and the land and, thanks to the vision of her parents her rebirth is complete and she can return to civilization and the human world as a new person and a "creative non-victim" (Survival 40).

The title of the novel communicates a sense of incompleteness, conveyed by the gerundive form; the verb “to surface” may be immediately connected with water, the concept of depth and the unconscious. We may expect to see something emerging from the depths of a sea, a lake, something that may have been repressed for a long time. This is the case in *Surfacing*. In fact, the protagonist is almost passive when memories, flashbacks, scenes and stories from her past appear before her eyes and she lets herself get carried away into the past as if she is reliving those episodes of her life. We also get the impression the narrator is not in control of her mind, which is not able to silence her memories because the setting surrounding her triggers episodes from her past.

Surfacing deals with feminism as well, in fact, Atwood is known for her feminist ideas. The novel is set in the early 1970s, “an era of sexual liberation” and “sexual emancipation” for women (Bouson 40) and it denounces the inequality between men and women, despite the ‘revolution’ that was taking place at the time. In fact, Atwood affirms that men are still controlling and restraining women with patriarchy and women remain “bound in a social formation that assigns man the role of sexual aggressor and women that of passive victim and sexual object” (Bouson 40). The author provides the example of the couple Anna–David, in which the woman is humiliated and abused, but she does nothing to change her position, although she has the chance to divorce. Atwood reverses the binary opposition at the base of patriarchy by rejecting “masculinity, culture and the rational” and “by valorizing femininity, nature and the irrational” (Bouson 40). Atwood also “challenges the privileging of masculinity as the site of power and knowledge” (Bouson 52) personified by the narrator’s father and she chooses the figure of the protagonist’s mother as a more salvific guide for the narrator. Furthermore, the author chooses a female protagonist to underline her will to oppose

the model of the male hero who is usually selected as protagonist of the quest novel and the detective story.

In fact, as far as the genre is concerned, *Surfacing* appears as a detective story at the beginning and it challenges the standard of this genre: readers are confronted with an initial quest (for the protagonist's missing father) that becomes a quest for the protagonist's identity. Readers expect the narrator to solve the mystery that surrounds her father's disappearance, given the fact that the protagonist acts detective-like and she tries to decipher the clues. However, the detective plot concerning her father's mysterious disappearance moves to the background when she realizes an emotional death occurred in her, leaving her completely numb and anaesthetized. She adopts an attitude similar to the one she employed to search for her father to understand when her "internal fragmentation" (Bouson 42) happened and why she is emotionally numb. In a similar fashion, readers attempt to unravel the clues concerning the protagonist's past in order to make sense of her way of thinking, since the narrator may actually be unreliable. In fact, the novel revolves around a lie, namely the narrator's marriage and subsequent divorce and the readers get involved in "a web of denials and falsehoods" (Bouson 41).

1972 is also the year of publication of Atwood's famous provoking essay *Survival: a thematic guide to Canadian literature*, in which Atwood focuses on the themes Canadian literature deals with: she envisages victimhood and survival as the founding motifs of Canadian literature. The author explains her thesis about victim positions and she provides examples to support it. Atwood also states that Canada is in a victim position towards other countries whose literary identity has been established a long time

before. She states Canadian novels are stories of failure and its heroes and heroines are victims and she devises a model identifying four basic victim positions to describe the typical plot trajectories employed in Canadian literature. The first position affirms the victim denies the fact that s/he is a victim; the second position states that the victim accepts his/her position, but blames fate, God or "any other general powerful idea" (Survival 37) for his/her role and s/he sees this position as unchangeable; Position Three is characterized by the refusal of the impossibility to change a victim position into a more active role; Position Four is the condition of a non-victim who removes the "external and/or internal causes of victimization" (Survival 38).

In fact, "stick a pin in Canadian literature at random, and nine times out of ten you'll hit a victim" (Survival 39). Atwood also states that victimhood and survival are central themes in Canadian literature because "the land *was* hard, and we have been (and are) an exploited colony; our literature is rooted in those facts" (Survival 41). Nature is also a common theme in Canadian novels: it is represented as "often dead and unanswering or actively hostile to man", and it may play "some dirty trick" (Survival 49). In fact, the land kills and Canadians are in a victim position also towards nature. "Death by nature" occurs very often in Canadian literature and in real life: "something in the natural environment murders the individual" (Survival 54). Death may happen by drowning, freezing, being confronted with a dangerous wild animal or with Indian tribes. Alternatively, the protagonist may have "a rock fall on him" or he may "fall off one", "squash [...] under a tree" (Survival 55) or he may commit suicide. In addition, humans who spend a long time alone in this harsh environment, but manage to survive, go "bushed", crazy, and this may be connected to "legends of the Wendigo [...] the character sees too much of the wilderness, and in a sense becomes it, leaving his

humanity behind" (Survival 55). However, "death is presented as a fact, as the kind of thing that happens" (Survival 56).

Atwood also reflects on the fact that the majority of Canadian works depict characters in the second victim position and so does *Surfacing* at the beginning. However, the protagonist undergoes an inner journey of rebirth that allows her to move to Position Three and acknowledge she had a part of responsibility in aborting her child. Consequently, she also moves to Position Four when she spends some days alone on the island, surrounded only by nature and refusing anything that has to do with civilization. When she re-emerges from the depth of her descent into madness, she affirms she will not be a victim any longer and the reader gets the impression she is a new creature who now plays an active role in her own life and who can never be relegated to a passive position again.

However, "once man starts winning" the struggle against cruel nature, "sympathy begins to shift from the victorious hero to the defeated giantess, and the problem is no longer how to avoid being swallowed up by a cannibalistic Nature but how to avoid destroying her" (Survival 60). In spite of his feeling a victim towards nature, man has the power to conquer and exploit nature, tame the wilderness and commodify the land. It has been noted that humans can be "more destructive towards Nature than Nature can be towards man; and [...] the destruction of Nature is equivalent to self-destruction on the part of man" (Survival 60) since all living beings are connected to each other. This attitude is exemplified in *Surfacing* by the Americans' behavior and treatment of nature.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I will attempt to read closely the first chapter of *Surfacing* and I will try to discuss the choice of almost every word, relying on Perry's theory concerning the order of textual elements and how their disposition contributes to create the text's meaning. I will also take into consideration Phelan's study on the employment of the simultaneous present tense, which is the tense Atwood employs in the first and third section of the novel.

Thanks to this attentive analysis we will be able to identify the themes Atwood deals with in *Surfacing*, for example, change, returning, memory, trauma, nature, religion, family bonds, love and death and I will choose three of them. Trauma, nature and spirituality may be relevant keys to disclose the novel's meaning and they will be analysed and interpreted in the three chapters following the first one.

First, trauma literary studies will be considered, along with Freud's theorization of the repression mechanism, to explain the nature of the protagonist's trauma and subsequent censorship. Secondly, nature will be useful to introduce the theme of ecofeminism and to provide a means of comparison and contrast to the victimization of women. Finally, spirituality may constitute a way out for the protagonist, since she plunges into a state of controlled insanity, which resembles a state of induced trance in shamanism, thanks to which the initiated person may have visions, to approach nature and the non-human world in order to find her deeper self.

Chapter One – A Close Reading of the First Chapter of *Surfacing*

I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have sea-planes for hire. But this is still near the city limits; we didn't go through, it's swelled enough to have a bypass, that's success.

I never thought of it as a city but as the last or first outpost depending on which way we were going, an accumulation of sheds and boxes and one main street with a movie theatre, the itz, the oyal, red R burnt out, and two restaurants which served identical grey hamburger steaks plastered with mud gravy and canned peas, watery and pallid as fisheyes, and French fries bleary with lard. Order a poached egg, my mother said, you can tell if it's fresh by the edges.(Atwood 3)¹

I will attempt to read closely the first two paragraphs of *Surfacing*, wearing the shoes of a first time naïve reader and I will try to outline, analyze and discuss in details the choices Atwood opted for in the opening of her second novel.

The first word we encounter is the personal pronoun "I". This I is ungendered, it could well be a female or a male voice speaking, but for the time being we cannot tell. The person who is in charge of the story is saying "I" so we can infer, according to Genette's narratology, we are confronted with a homodiegetic intradiegetic type of narration, which amounts to say that the narrating voice is a character inside the story and is telling his or her own experience. It can also be inferred that this ungendered narrator

¹ All references from *Surfacing* come from Atwood, Margaret. *Surfacing*. Virago Press, 1972.

will be the focalizer of the story, as a result, we will witness the events through his/her eyes and we will be explained facts according to his/her opinion. The choice of a first person narrator implies a certain degree of subjectivity and, consequently, of uncertainty, which are conveyed by the first sentence "I can't believe I'm on this road again" (3). According to Rao, being "I" a character, "I' can lie" (Rao 25) and we will have to bear this in mind.

At first sight, the opening words "I can't believe I'm on this road again" (3), would seem to convey a sense of surprise and yet, we cannot ignore the basic rule of primacy effect and consider the word choice more carefully, acknowledging the fact that the first verb we encounter is "believe", preceded by the modal verb "can't". This verb is the first we associate to the narrator's speech and we may detect a sense of uncertainty, confusion and not being in control of the situation on the narrator's part. In fact, these verbs are associated to the idea of inability and to the narrator's set of beliefs. S/he cannot believe the situation s/he is living at the moment of telling. S/he does not seem to be in total control of his/her life, since s/he could not have imagined him/herself to be on that road again. Probably s/he had previously planned the journey, but s/he realizes how distant s/he had been from that road only when s/he is travelling on it. S/he is incredulous about the reasons which led him/her on that road, but for the time being, we are not able to tell. We would have had a different impression, had s/he said "I'm on this road again". That would have meant s/he was in total control of his/her experience and choices and that sentence would have been more neutral. Moreover, avoiding the negative form would have conveyed a positive feeling about the fact of being on that road again.

The present tense implies that the person who is saying "I" is experiencing while telling the story and it can be assumed that the story is not narrated retrospectively, but simultaneously. However, it is impossible to tell and live in the same moment, because we will have to pause in order to narrate. This present tense represents the narrator's suspension between past and present and it conveys freshness, rawness and a deep involvement by the narrator in the events. Moreover, the narrative strategy of the homodiegetic simultaneous present places the reader in a much different position to the narrator and the story than would any retrospective narrative. Since the person who is telling does not know how the events will turn out, it is not possible for him/her to shape the story because s/he does not know the end. As a consequence, the reader will have to bear in mind that the narrator does not have any directions in mind for his/her story. On the contrary, the future is taking shape before the reader's eyes as well as in front of the narrator's eyes and it is open to any possibility. The storyteller can try and suppose what will happen next, but s/he knows less than the reader him/herself. In fact, we read the novel aware of the fact that Atwood has given shape to the narrative, there is a kind of direction towards which the story is progressing and we are used to inferring, questioning and reasoning about what we are reading. However, our understanding of the story is tentative at the beginning, since we are subject to the narrative moves the narrator chooses and we cannot tell so far which path the novel is taking. As stated above, the narrator in *Surfacing* is self-reflective and is not able to use his/her power of reflection to give an account of his/her experience and the reader has no other choice than trusting him/her because this is the only way we have to enter this story world for the time being.

However, the technique of the homodiegetic simultaneous narration has caused a debate concerning its efficacy. Scholars argue that the present tense narration is characterized by instability and that the past tense is normally chosen in the realm of narratives, while the present tense, on the other hand, is commonly employed in the genre of poetry and drama. Although the present tense narration is believed to violate the mimetic standard according to which a person cannot experience and narrate simultaneously, it has gained critical and popular success which invites us to reconsider the aforementioned norm.

Narratologically speaking, in first person narrations the "I" is split into two instances who look at the events with a different perspective. We can distinguish between a narrating I and an experiencing I. The narrating I is an older self who is retracing the facts the experiencing I has lived. The experiencing I is a younger self and knows less than the narrating I. The experiencing I knows the facts only at the moment of experiencing, while the narrating I is able to narrate retrospectively about experiences s/he lived in the past. Remembering creates distance between the narrating voice and the events, while telling at the same time of experiencing results in freshness, simultaneity and intimacy between the narrator and his/her audience. However, we are not able to confirm which of the two types the narrator of *Surfacing* is up to now, although the use of the present tense would seem to disclaim the retrospective hypothesis.

This character-narrator is a reflective human being, but Atwood denies him/her the chance to distance from his/her experience in order for him/her to completely make sense of his/her story. Consequently, according to Phelan, the narrator's understanding

comes in bits and pieces and s/he keeps on revising it, like we do, since we are listening to the narrator's simultaneous perspective on his/her ongoing experience. In addition, as we witness the story through the narrator's eyes, we may find it difficult to distance ourselves from the narrator and understand the story without being influenced by his/her views and actions. Our difficulty in seeing beyond the narrator's limited vision may become progressively demanding, since we will feel sympathy for him/her and we would wish his/her vision to be as transparent and trustworthy as possible.

The present tense goes hand in hand with other words, namely deictics. The term "deictics" refers to words which define time and place of a given situation. Adjectives, pronouns and adverbials are examples of deictics and their aim is to frame a deictic field into which a certain action is taking place. In the first paragraph of *Surfacing* we can observe the use of deictics Atwood chose:

I can't believe I'm on **this** road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they **now** have sea-planes for hire. But **this** is still near the city limits; we didn't go thorough, it's swelled enough to have a bypass, that's success.
(3).

As far as verb tenses are concerned, we can see that some verbs are in the present continuous form, which also emphasizes the idea of the events happening at the moment in which the narrator is speaking.

By rereading the first paragraph, we can notice the use of "this" and "now" which reinforces the power of the present tense. "This" is a demonstrative adjective or pronoun which conveys the idea of being there and presence. It is used to define objects or

situations close to the person who is speaking. Once again, the narrator is denied the distance between him/her and the events s/he is telling about, because s/he is embodied in the story which is in the present tense, namely the tense of action, simultaneity and in becoming. The time adverbial “now” communicates the time in which the ungendered narrator is telling the story, which is the same time in which s/he is living this precise experience.

“Road” and “again” are thick words in terms of meaning. When we read the opening of *Surfacing*, we could be reminded of Jack Kerouac’s 1957 American novel “On the Road”, a manifesto of the Beat Generation. The protagonist of Kerouac’s story travels incessantly by car, by bus or hitch-hiking throughout Mexico and the USA, meeting different girlfriends and some friends. The theme of travel here equals the male protagonist’s self-discovery. While travelling, Sal Paradise chooses a free lifestyle, characterized by drinking, movement and changefulness because he wants to rebel against social conventions. Atwood may have had this novel in mind while she was writing the beginning of her novel. This allusion to “On the Road” may lead us to assume that *Surfacing* will be a similar self-discovery novel, but from the point of view of a Canadian. So far, we know that an ungendered unnamed narrator is on this road “again”. This adverbial, “again”, means the road is not new to him/her, on the contrary, s/he used to travel on it a lot in the past and the reader may start thinking about the theme of returning. By reading only the first line we do not know where the narrator is coming from or where s/he is directed, but we can infer s/he is travelling and a long time has passed since s/he last saw that road and s/he did not imagine s/he would have been driving on that road another time. Maybe s/he thought s/he would never again see that place because s/he wanted to forget his/her past and never come back. Being on a

road suggests movement, choosing a path to follow and the idea of a journey. Indeed, the storyteller is “twisting along past the lake” (3), so s/he is travelling through nature and s/he is describing what s/he sees. She is in sight of a lake “where the white birches are dying” (3) from an illness spreading up from the South. The reader may imagine that this “South” could be the USA, being the novel Canadian, but we will have to wait for more details to reinforce or reject this hypothesis. The unnamed narrator can also observe that sea-planes are being hired in order for tourists to explore the lake and s/he is surprised to see tourism there. The feeling a reader could detect is the narrator’s aversion of returning to a run-down and forgotten place, where there is nothing to visit but a lake, which, according to what the narrating voice is saying, is nothing special to see. However, we are “still near the city limits; we didn’t go through” (3) and the changes the narrator is witnessing, such as the bypass, have already struck him/her, maybe because s/he would expect to see that road unchanged, as s/he left it a long time before s/he left.

When we assume, infer and attempt to understand, we are filling the gaps of the narration, we are completing the missing pieces of information with what is not written. This mechanism is automatic and it is used not only when we read fiction, but in everyday life. In fact, we as readers receive the literary text “through a process of ‘concretization’. Its verbal elements appear one after another, and its semantic complexes build up ‘cumulatively’, through adjustments and readjustments” (Perry 35). Indeed, linearity is a characteristic of language and, as a consequence, a text can only reveal a piece of information after another, it cannot reveal the whole story all at once. This means that other material will be grasped in a second time, as the reading proceeds and this has repercussions in determining the meaning of a text. As a matter of fact, the

order and distribution of the words of a given text can influence the essence of the reading process and of the understanding of the text itself. Should the elements of a text be rearranged in a different order and distribution, our brain would activate alternative hypotheses about the story we are approaching to read. For the time being, components of a text can be hints of a potential development of the story, but we need further elements to confirm our thesis.

According to Perry, the numerous possible explanations which are viable to justify the order of appearance of specific elements in the text could be distinguished into two kinds: 1) model-oriented motivations; 2) rhetorical or reader-oriented motivations. The first type suggests the text is adhering or imitating an extra-textual model. At the moment of reading, the reader enters the story world with a baggage of social conventions which s/he has already learned in reality, but which functions also in fiction. These are a set of frames which “can motivate the convergence of as many of the various details in the text as possible” (Perry 36). Each frame corresponds to a certain order, which can be a temporal order or a spatial order or the order of the narrator’s consciousness. As a consequence, the frame has the function of a guiding line which helps the reader reconstruct the order of the narrative and motivating it. Most commonly, the reader looks for a chronological order and for a cause-and-effect relationship between the facts, which is the mode in which our brain works. In this context, we can distinguish between *fabula* and *syuzhet*: *fabula* is the natural chronological order of the events in a story, while *syuzhet* is the reshuffling of that material in order to create a different order. For each *fabula* there can be many *syuzhets*, as a text can be arranged in many different orders. The second type, or the reader-oriented motivations, hints at the fact that the literary material is arranged to

produce a certain effect on the reader and its aim is to control the reading process so that the reader will think about a possible realization of the text instead of another. As a result, “the reader may be said to be led into a ‘trap’, i.e., is not supposed to identify the organizing principle, merely to be affected by it” (Perry 40). Moreover, the choices of distribution of elements in a text may function as an obstacle to the reader’s understanding of the story and may render the reading more complicated. As we shall see for *Surfacing*, details appearing at the beginning of a text may delineate “shades of meaning’ to be activated in later material which is to be assimilated to it, accentuating certain aspects and weakening others; anticipating one bit of information about a character and delaying another, of a different nature entirely, may ‘prejudice’ the reader in advance in favor the character, building up a ‘reservoir’ of sympathy that will be hard to renounce and will condition details of a contrary nature later on in the text.” (Perry 41). For example, “the disease spreading up from the south” will be dealt with throughout the book and the reader will understand what Atwood meant in the very first lines of the novel, which may differ from the expectations of the reader.

When we read we hypothesize in order to answer questions such as: What is happening? Where is it happening? What is the purpose? Who is the speaker? What is his/her position? And many others. So as to reply to these questions, we choose a frame which functions for as many elements of the text as possible and it is only when we continue reading that we will see our hypothesis confirmed or rejected. Our comprehension at the beginning of a novel is inferior to the one we will gain as the narration proceeds. At the first stage of reading, the aforementioned questions may remain open, since it is only in the light of the addition of new material that we will know if our suppositions were right. For the time being, more than one hypothesis can

coexist, even though they may be proven to be false. It is also likely that readers would not have come up with such a hypothesis, had they had further information.

The automatic mechanism of filling the gaps of the literary text is created by the reciprocal dependence between frames and textual material. On the one hand, the frame accommodates as many elements of the text as possible and on the other hand, the meaning of those very elements depends on the frame which organizes them. The process of applying meaning to textual material happens simultaneously to the choice of a frame. Consequently, while we are reading, we imagine frames and select the most appropriate, the one which is preferable to the reader. Indeed, the choice of a frame is an attempt on the reader's part to complete the missing information, to derive it, since it is not clearly written.

A frame is chosen by a reader because it combines the major number of elements, because it connects them closely and usually, because it is the most simple and obvious frame. Frames are used to allow the reader to supply what the text does not say and this operation takes place from the beginning of the reading activity. Although the reader's hypothesis are tentative, s/he does not wait until the end of the story before starting to comprehend it, but s/he connects and organizes elements in order to make sense of the material.

Despite the fact of having read only the beginning of a novel, the reader may not only guess a frame to make sense of the current material, but s/he may start predicting about the possible future development of the story. As for *Surfacing*, a reader could expect the narrator's journey to come to an end and arrive to a destination. These automatic activities are both conscious and unconscious and manifold psychological experiments

have demonstrated that they take place at the beginning of a novel because it is the part which receives more attention than the rest of the text. Psychologists have named it the Primacy Effect, namely the effect that arises from the information placed at the opening of a message. The beginning of a story is a moment of high involvement by the reader and it gains its power from its mere position. In fact, experiments have shown that we read more slowly the beginning than the middle or the end of a narrative. From the beginning, readers attempt to find the centre of the text: for example, they regard the first character as the protagonist as long as s/he is replaced by another one or the real protagonist. The same happens for the topic. What can be assumed is that “the centre must always be occupied and, before its occupant can be removed, an alternative must be offered.” (Perry 53).

Due to the studies of the primacy effect, it has been demonstrated that first impressions are hard to eradicate. In fact, experiments have demonstrated that early material is given much more weight than information that comes later in the text, which is either ignored by the reader or considered less relevant than the information read before. In other words, once the reader has built an idea about a character or a situation, s/he tends not to pay attention to additional information about it. In light of this it can be stated that “what comes first affects the nature of the whole” (Perry 55).

Although our reading proceeds in a linear fashion and we read one sentence after another, it is of utmost importance for what has been said so far that our reading process is not unidirectional. In fact, a backward movement plays a significant role as far as confirming or rejecting hypothesis and activating different frames are concerned. The inferences of the reader cast light on new elements and old elements become clear

thanks to the understanding of previous parts of the text. This phenomenon of returning to old material is central to attributing to it a new shade of meaning, which has become clear only later in the text. However, a first reading is rarely enough to grasp all the shades of meaning and to achieve a full concretization of the literary text, which may be reached only after additional readings. When we are dealing with this backward mechanism we may distinguish between 1) Retrospective additional patterning, which makes an additional usage of a textual segment possible; and a 2) Retrospective repatterning, which is a correction and transformation activity in which a frame is cancelled in order for a more suitable one to substitute it. Both processes take place as the reading proceeds and they involve comparing and confronting old frames and meanings to find the best viable solution to the text.

Rejected meanings and frame play an influential role when it comes to comparing frames. Sometimes rejected frames and meanings survive after their rejection and they function as a means of comparison for the reader when s/he is reflecting about the relation between frames, in order to choose the frame which accommodates as many textual elements as possible. This happens at the moment of the first reading, but also during a second time reading, which is a sort of “reconstruction of the naïve reading” (Perry 357). The reader is now aware of the fact that elements could lead him/her away from the path the narration is following, of the traps the author set in order to complicate the reading.

In light of Perry’s thesis we may continue analyzing the second paragraph of *Surfacing*. The narrating voice does not consider that place as a city, “but as the last or first outpost depending on which way we were going” (3). An outpost suggests the idea

of pioneering and the perception that beyond that place there is nothing but wild nature. As for the direction of the narrator's journey, we can assume s/he is travelling from South to North, since the disease affecting the white birches in the previous paragraph was "spreading up from the south" (3). If our supposition that a Canadian author is writing about Canada is correct, we can deduce that South equals the USA and North equals Canada, namely the narrator's journey is taking place somewhere on the border between the USA and Canada. Then a couple of lines describing this outpost follow. This concise description is that of a lifeless run-down site: "an accumulation of sheds and boxes and one main street with a movie theatre, the itz, the oyal, red R burnt out, and two restaurants which served identical grey hamburger steaks plastered with mud gravy canned peas, watery and pallid as fisheyes, and French fries bleary with lard" (3). The battered outpost s/he remembers from childhood has now become a tourist attraction, where visitors can hire a sea-plane to explore the lake and s/he is surprised and sarcastic about the changes, "it's swelled enough to have a bypass, that's success" (3).

These few lines portraying the dullness of the city centre are in the past tense because the storyteller is giving an account of how s/he remembered the city. The reader may perceive a note of disgust in the voice of the narrator when mentioning the huts, the bare main street whose shops have burnt out signs on top and the unappetizing food the restaurants used to serve. Continuing with the reading, we discover that the narrator is not the only one who considered food disgusting in those restaurants, but his/her mother's opinion was the same. In fact, she advised him/her to "order a poached egg [...] you can tell if it's fresh by the edges" (3). It can be assumed that this is a childhood memory: the narrator remembers having had a meal in one of those restaurants with

his/her mother and the fact that she advised him/her about what to order, so s/he would not get food poisoned. This is the first time a mother figure is mentioned in the text and it is immediately connected to receiving advice concerning how to be safe in the outer world. As a consequence, we may think this mother figure is a conventional one, associated with the idea of protecting her children and teaching them how to be safe even when she would not be there to keep them safe.

In light of Perry's and Phelan's theories and the analysis which has been outlined so far, I will attempt to read closely the remaining pages of the first chapter of *Surfacing*.

After mentioning a mother figure, an episode concerning a brother is narrated. Both the reference to the mother and the third paragraph are in the past tense. Apparently, this tense choice suggests we are reading the description of a memory belonging to the narrator's brother childhood, triggered by the sight of the couple of run-down restaurants, as s/he is passing by. We can assume there is a certain distance between the narrator and the fact which is being told, since his/her tone appears quite neutral.

The young boy is remembered going under the table and sliding "his hands up and down the waitress's legs while she was bringing the food" (3). The storyteller tells us this fact happened during the war and that the waitress was wearing "shiny orange rayon stockings" (4) and that he probably had never seen them before, since his mother did not use to wear them. However, we are told that this episode occurred before the narrator was born (3) and it appears problematic, because we have the perception the narrator was him/herself at the restaurant, observing his/her brother touching the waitress's stockings. A question may easily arise: how could possibly the narrator give

an account of such an episode as if s/he had witnessed it if s/he was not born yet? Either we had the wrong impression or maybe the narrator's mother told him/her this episode when s/he was a child and probably the storyteller assimilated it to other memories s/he already had and s/he ended believing s/he had lived it.

"A different year there we ran through the snow across the sidewalk in our bare feet because we had no shoes, they'd worn out during the summer. In the car that time we sat with our feet wrapped in blankets, pretending we were wounded. My brother said the Germans shot our feet off" (4). The memory of the narrator's brother in the restaurant triggers another memory. This time the narrating voice describes the act of running bare-footed through the snow because his/hers and his/her brother's shoes were too worn out to be usable. The reader may deduce that their family was not wealthy, since their parents could not afford a new pair of shoes for them. The narrator's brother had fun wrapping his feet and his brother/sister's ones in blankets while sitting in their car, pretending they had been hurt by German soldiers and this leads us assume the war mentioned previously was the second world war.

In the following paragraph, the narrating voice shifts back to the simultaneous present tense and the link between the scene of having his/her feet wrapped in blankets and the new scene seems to be a car. The narrator associates the old family car with the one s/he is sitting into at the moment of telling. "Now though I'm in another car, David's and Anna's; it's sharp-finned and striped with chrome, a lumbering monster left over from ten years ago, he has to reach under the instrument panel to turn on the lights." (4). The car the storyteller is sitting into is said to be old as well and the word "monster" associated to it conveys a negative feeling, maybe the narrating voice is not feeling at

ease in the car. In this quotation we can also see two other characters are being mentioned for the first time: David and Anna. The reader may assume they are a couple, maybe they are even married and they could well be friends of the narrator. The setting of the novel is taking shape before our eyes and a piece of information follows the previous one: now we know that the narrating voice is in a car with two other people and they are travelling to the North.

“David says they can’t afford a newer one, which probably isn’t true. He’s a good driver, I realize that, I keep my hand on the door in spite of it.” (4). According to Perry, the first description of a character makes the reader create an opinion about him/her and is hard to wipe out once established. The first notions we discover about David are that he says he does not have enough money to buy a new car, but the narrator somehow knows this is not the truth. We may assume the narrator thinks he is a liar and maybe he does not usually tell the truth. Secondly, we are told he is a good driver and the storyteller has had experience of this during the journey. However, s/he prefers keeping a hand on the car’s door, even though David can drive really well. As a consequence, the reader may wonder why the narrator feels the need of keeping his/her hand on the door as if s/he needs to be ready to jump off the car. This piece of information leads us to reinforce the hypothesis according to which the person who is saying “I” does not feel at ease in that car with those people, or better, s/he does not consider David to be trustworthy and s/he is expecting something bad to happen. Alternatively, the narrator may be thought of suffering from anxiety problems whose origins are to be found in his/her past.

The narration continues letting us know that this is exactly what the narrator is thinking about: being ready to “get out quickly if I have to” (4). Why could the storyteller be so scared and tense? What happened in his/her life to make him/her doubt about his/her companions? What kind of experience did s/he live? These questions will remain unanswered for the time being, but the reader will bear them in mind, looking for clues. The narrator is expected to trust them, since they seem to be friends and they are undertaking a long journey together. As a consequence, the reader may start feeling there is something disquieting about the journey and the story as well. In fact, “I’ve driven in the same car with them before but on this road it doesn’t seem right, either the three of them are in the wrong place or I am” (4). This is not the first journey the narrator has undertaken with those friends and we have not yet been told about the third character who is in the car. Apparently, this is the first time negative feelings are arising while travelling together with Anna, David and the third person, because the situation does not seem to be right at all to the storyteller. The motif of change is being introduced: s/he used to be on that same road in the past, but now s/he is driving on it with different people in a different car and this time, being on that road seems to be wrong.

“I’m in the back seat with the backpacks; this one, Joe, is sitting beside me chewing gum and holding my hand” (4). After adding this piece of information, we know that David is driving and Anna is sitting next to him, the narrating voice is sitting in the back and the third character is beside him/her, holding his/her hand. The backpacks could be a hint that their trip is going to last more than a day and that they need to carry what they need for a longer stay. Joe seems to be first associated to a pack, so he gives the impression to be quiet and passive as an inanimate object, apart from chewing a gum

and holding his/her hand. The fact that Joe is holding the narrator's hand leads us to assume the narrator is a woman for the first time in the narration. However, we could not be sure since this is not enough to draw a conclusion about the narrator's gender. From this point onward, we will accommodate the narrator in a frame in which she is a woman, since this represents the simplest explanation to the fact that she is wearing a ring and a male character is holding her hand and we will refer to protagonist as a she, until our hypothesis will be proved to be false, after finding evidence in the text.

Secondly, she focuses on his hand. "the palm is broad", he has got "short finger" which "tighten and relax" and he is playing with her gold ring. His hands remind her of the hands of a peasant, which was what Anna said once at a party, while she was reading hands to have fun instead of having conversation with other guests (4). The narrator was also told by Anna to have "peasant feet" and this is something she has in common with Joe, who, we can assume, is in a relationship with the narrator. Looking at Joe's hands makes the narrator shift the focus to her own hands and what Anna said on that same party. "Do you have a twin?" I said No. 'Are you positive' she said 'because some of your lines are double'" (4). The fact of having a twin mentioned and the narrator's answer could lead the reader to think the narrator could have had a really close relationship with someone similar to her. Maybe she really had a twin, but she prefers not to let other people know about it, or she had a strong connection with another human being. The double lines on her palm reinforce the idea of plurality, of a double or a shadow lingering behind her. Later, Anna continued examining her hand "You had a good childhood but then there's this funny break" (5), describing the protagonist's life. The reader may wonder what "this funny break" may mean. Perhaps a change occurred in her life, but the narrator is not comfortable with the path her palm-reading

was embarking on and she tried to avoid commenting. Instead, she gives the impression she only cared about a thing and she no longer wanted to overthink about her past, so she ignored the reference to the break in one of her palm's lines and she told Anna "she could skip the rest" (5), asking her how long she was going to live. Then Anna started reading Joe's hands and she found out his "hands were dependable but not sensitive" (5). Joe's hands are large, steady and trustworthy but we are informed they are not very delicate. We may interpret this hand-reading characterizing Joe as a honest person, who, on the other hand, is not very sensitive. The narrator thought that this was a joke and she laughed, but only after laughing did she realize Anna was telling the truth about Joe and that was not supposed to be something to laugh about.

Joe's description continues in the following paragraph: he is described almost with animal features. He is compared to "the buffalo on the u.s. nickel, shaggy and blunt-snouted, with small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction" (5). She could give us this portrait of Joe since she was the one sitting next to him, so we know he looks like a buffalo only when watched from the side. In addition, she is the only one who can notice facets that other people may not gather, since she is probably in a love relationship with Joe. So, we may infer that the animal features are not easy to detect at first sight. This character description is the most detailed we have read so far in the book. We may assume the storyteller considers her relationship with Joe more relevant than the one she has with Anna and David. The reference to the extinction of his "species" compared to the buffalo's species may mean he is one of the last individuals with almost (in)visible animalistic features, implying that he may be a representative of a specific kind of male. He is silent for most of the time and the fact that his physiognomy resembles that of a

buffalo may suggest he is in a strong connection with nature. Moreover, the North American buffalo is depicted on flags, logos and seals and it was a sacred animal among native Indians. Joe considers himself “deposed, unjustly”, which is the same opinion the narrator has of him and she is also convinced he would rather live in a kind of enclosed space for endangered species, “like a bird sanctuary” (5) in order to survive. Joe’s description ends with the narrating voice thinking he is beautiful the way he is and she understands from his body language that he no longer wishes to be stared at, since he lets go her hand, “he takes his gum out [...] and crosses his arms” (5). She stops observing him and she turns her face to look out of the window.

She focuses on the landscape: she can see dead trees which resemble skeletons on “flattened cow-sprinkled hills”, “needle trees” and “the cuttings dynamited in pink and grey granite” (5), other signs of the action of humans on the land. The narrator is again measuring the changes along the road she used to know when she was a child. It is likely that trees used to be lush instead of resembling skeletons or being cut down in order to create room for “flimsy cabins” for tourist who come to visit the “gateway to the North”, as she can read on a sign. She notices that more than one town on the border claims to be the gateway to the North to attract tourists and earn money by selling nature. This sign, along with the reference to the town as an “outpost”, also strengthens the fact that this part of the journey is taking place on a border and they are crossing a frontier.

The sight of that sign reminds her of a political slogan, “the future is in the North” and immediately this sentence evokes what her father used to say as a reaction to the slogan: “there was nothing in the North but the past and not much of that either” (5). The

Canadian North is where wilderness prevails and perhaps her father knew how it was like to live in the wilderness, but we will have to wait to validate or reject this supposition. Maybe he was referring to the fact that in the North there is the arctic climate, which is associated with death because only a few animals can survive at those freezing temperatures, while human beings cannot. This is the first time a father figure is mentioned and the reader now has a clear image of the narrator's family: she has got a mother, a brother and a father. We have the perception they are very distant from the protagonist and they could possibly be dead. The following sentences of the text let us know her father has disappeared: "wherever he is now, dead or alive and nobody knows which, he's no longer making epigrams" (5). The narrator herself is not able to tell if her father is dead or alive and the fact he is missing could be the reason why she is returning to the place she is heading to.

A reflection about her parents follows: she states that "they have no right to get old" and that she envies "people whose parents died when they were young" because it is "easier to remember, they stay unchanged" (5). She seems to speak about her parents as if they were dead, but she also says she does not wish to see them ageing, which may mean they are still alive. These sentences are problematic since they appear to contradict each other and the reader is not able to decide if her parents are dead or alive. She continues thinking that they would not change and she says she is sure everything would remain the same, had she made up her mind to visit them after a long time. In addition, she likes thinking of them as living in a parallel dimension in a different age and being busy with their own concerns, as if they were "behind a wall as translucent as jello, mammoths frozen in a glacier" (6). The word "wall" implies a distance and a separation and it may also hint at the fact that they are not visible. The

word “mammoth” reminds us of prehistory, since those animals used to live in that age and they have been extinct for millenniums. Comparing her parents to pre-historical creatures reinforces the idea of distance, which is not only temporal and geographic, but it could be also an emotional distance; maybe she did not share their set of values or she detached from them because she felt they belonged to a different age. In fact, she seems to stick to the present tense and as a result she believes she belongs to the present; conversely, her parents are relegated to the past and they are alive only in the realm of memories and recollection. We can perceive the unnamed narrator feels both resentment at her parents, apparently because they aged and consequently changed, and her desire to freeze and frame them in an everlasting unchanged memory. We can assume her relationship with her parents was problematic and this may be the reason why she decided to leave and was not ready to go back and visit them, as she says “I kept putting it off, there would be too many explanations” (6).

In the coming paragraph the description of the landscape is resumed. The narrator reflects and she realizes that what looks like “an innocent hill”, covered with trees, is in reality a “pit the Americans hollowed out” (6). She heard they had left, but she cannot be sure about it. She hypothesizes the American soldiers could still be living there thanks to a subterfuge and nobody will know, since only servicepersons are allowed to stay in that area and nobody else can cross the military border. We can notice she seems not to be content about the fact of having American soldiers living in the outposts on the border between Canada and the U.S.A., probably because she considers their presence as an invasion; however “the city invited them to stay, they were good for business, they drank a lot” (6). Business are presumably the reason why the Americans had been welcomed by Canadians to stay in that zone. On the other hand, they destroyed the environment to

build a military base: they hollowed out a pit and they installed a rocket silo, as the narrator can see passing by. “That’s where the rockets are”, she should say “were” instead, but she does not correct herself (6). She is showing to Joe and her friends the military site she remembers from her childhood journeys on that road and she is almost acting like a tourist guide, since she is the only one who knows the place, so she is the one who can tell the other characters where to pay attention along the road. However, we do not grasp any of the typical tourist guide enthusiasm in her exclamation. Indeed, she seems to be rather neutral and estranged from what she is saying.

David’s reply to her pointing at the rocket in order for her companions to look at them, “bloody fascists pig Yanks” (6) are the first words he utters. They sound like a cliché and he seems to be speaking in slogans and stereotypes. He appears to be disappointed with Americans for building a military base on a border area and not on their territory, but in the narrator’s opinion this comment is rather distracted and it looks like he is “commenting on the weather” (6). We may assume he is rather superficial and he does not consider the implications of a situation and, once again, this characteristic is quite negative.

On the other hand, Anna remains silent and avoids commenting. A few details about her physical appearance are added here: she is resting on the seat and “the ends of her light hair whipping in the draft from the side window that won’t close properly” (6). During the journey she used her voice only to sing the same songs over and over again, “trying to make her voice go throaty and deep; but it came out like a hoarse child’s” (6) and David, in the narrator’s opinion, appeared to be annoyed by it. In fact, he switched on the radio but there was no signal because they were on a border zone, “between

stations" (7) and so he started whistling while she was in the middle of a song. He obtained exactly what he wished: Anna stopped singing immediately. This scene is relevant for the reader to understand the type of relationship Anna and David have. They do not appear as equals since she immediately stops doing what she wishes to do in order to please her boyfriend/husband. He seems to be the one dictating the rules and she seems to be the one who obeys silently. In addition, he acts like this because he is annoyed by her singing and he seems not to care being rude to his girlfriend/wife in front of the narrator and Joe. David's being rude to Anna reinforces the reader's first impression of thinking he is an unpleasant character. Indeed, the narrator depicted him as not to be trustworthy, he comments without interest the narrator's statement and now he prevents Anna from continuing singing. Being aware of the fact that Atwood is the author of some feminist works, the reader may infer that David may well be embodying the male victimizer who perpetrates the principles of a patriarchal ideology in which women remain silent, are considered like objects and are believed to be inferior to men. However, this scene we witnessed through the unnamed narrator's eyes is only a hint and we will have to wait to see if this hypothesis is correct.

The storyteller defines Anna as her "best friend", her "best woman friend" (7) and this helps us understand the type of relationships between the two characters. Then, she adds she has "known her two months" (7) and this piece of information seems to contradict what she has said. How could Anna be her best friend if they have known each other only for two months? Their friendship may appear to be problematic because, generally, to consider a person your best friend, you would expect to have known each other for a long time, almost a lifetime. Being friend for only two months implies that your friend may not know your past, but only episodes belonging to the

present, namely the last few months. Maybe Anna is the only friend the narrator has and this could possibly be the reason why she considers her to be her best friend.

After the narrator's reflection about her friendship with Anna, she speaks to David to tell him "the bottle house"(7) is near and she gives him directions to reach it. His only answer is nodding and the car slows down. The narrator had told them about this house because she thought it would interest them, since David, assisted by Joe, is filming a documentary. Despite the fact that he has never done it before, Joe does the "camera work" because David believes "you can teach yourself what you need to learn" (7). The idea of the film is for the most part David's, who thinks of himself as the director. David "wants to get shots of things they come across, random samples he calls them, and that will be the name of the movie *too: Random Samples*" (7). They are using technology to freeze trivial scenes in time and create souvenirs. Their equipment is rented and they are going to film as many random scenes as possible in order to create a film. By adding this piece of information to what we already know, we may suppose the aim of the narrator's journey is looking for her disappeared father and David's reason to accompany her is to find material for his camera work. We may think he is an opportunist who underwent this journey only for his ends and this piece of information also strengthens the hypothesis of his being an unpleasant character.

When the narrator asks him "how can you tell what to put in if you don't already know what it's about?"(7) he looks at her as if it was pointless explaining his reasons to her. This reinforces the idea that he may consider women to be inferior to men. What comes next goes in the same direction. Indeed, Anna "said everyone she knew was making a movie" and David replied abruptly that this was not a reason why he should

not make a movie himself. Anna immediately said she was sorry but, behind his back, she made fun of him, calling his project “Random Pimples” (7). The fact that she makes fun of him only when he cannot see or hear her means she does not dare to confront him openly because she fears his reactions and this reinforces the idea we came up with about their relationship.

As the characters can notice, “the bottle villa is built of pop bottles cemented together with the bottoms facing out, green ones and brown ones in zig-zag patterns” (8). The patterns of the house remind the narrator of the ones she was taught at school when she was a child. She was taught how to draw on teepees. This hints at native Americans and this is the first time we can detect a reference to them. In fact, Canada was inhabited by Indian populations before the Europeans arrived and settled there. Nowadays only a few of them are left, because they were exterminated since they were believed to be inferior and Western people wanted to exploit the land for economical reasons. On the contrary, they belonged to a millenarian civilization whose society was well organized and they were respectful of the land and nature. This last aspect seems to have been lost, since nature is being sold, destroyed and commodified at the beginning of the novel.

Beside the house stands a bottle wall which reads “bottle villa”. David and Joe are the first who go towards the bottle villa and set their camera. The narrator and Anna follow and their being behind the men bespeaks their having a marginal and passive role in the filming project. Anna starts smoking a cigarette and the narrator observes her. “She’s wearing a purple tunic and white bellbottoms, they have a smear on them already, grease from the car. I told her she should wear jeans or something but she said she looks fat in them.” (8). In the narrator’s opinion, Anna is not wearing proper clothes for the

journey and, in fact, some grease of the car ended up smearing her trousers. Although she seems to be aware she should wear something more simple and comfortable, she is not willing to because she is interested in how she appears and she does not want to look fat. In addition, the storyteller advised her to change her clothes, Anna did not change her mind, showing she cares more about physical appearance than being safe when travelling. Probably, she is trying to please David and look attractive to him, even though he seems not to notice it.

The bottle house stands in the middle of a spruce swamp and when Anna mentions the effort of the person who built it, the narrator realizes she does not know anything about it. She only remembers she has always seen it there. She reflects that maybe the bottle villa could be the masterpiece of a “quirkish person exiled or perhaps a voluntary recluse like my father, choosing this swamp because it was the only place where he could fulfill his lifelong dream of living in a house of bottles.” (8). We may assume she considers her father a “quirkish person” or a “voluntary recluse” since he could well be capable of building such a house and living there in the middle of a spruce swamp if that was what he wished to do in his life. This piece of information about her father helps us construct an idea of him as an eccentric and nonconformist man.

While the unnamed narrator thinks the bottle house looks “unlikely” and believes it to be a “preposterous monument” (8), David stares at it with admiration, saying “Great [...] really neat” (8) to show he is pleased. He briefly hugs Anna, “as though she is somehow responsible for the Bottle Villa” (8) and then they go back to the car to resume their journey.

“I watch the side windows as though it’s a TV screen” (8), that is passively and the reader perceives a sense of boredom and indifference on the narrator’s part. She cannot remember anything until the car reaches the border, on which a sign reads “BIENVENUE on one side and WELCOME on the other” (8). Canada is characterized by bilingualism: English and French are spoken in different areas of the country, depending on the region. The fact that two languages coexist in a territory means that two cultures, two modes of making sense of the world and interpreting reality coexist as well. A language may create distance and the sign BIENVENUE/WELCOME represents the border of separation between two realities.

Paying more attention to the sign, the narrator observes it “has bullet holes in it, rusting red around the edges” (8-9), because “in the fall the hunters use it for practice; no matter how many times they replace it or paint it the bullet holes reappear, as though they aren’t put there but grow by a kind of inner logic or infection, like mould or boils” (9). It seems as if the narrator lived there long enough to witness the replacing of the sign many times and she describes the bullet holes like a kind of disease infecting the sign, which reappears any time it is substituted with a new one. It appears the narrator considers hunting an incurable disease typical of the autumn, whose effects are visible when observing the land. Joe is willing to film the sign, showing interest in the effects of hunting on the environment, but David refuses his proposal, because he does not consider the sign interesting enough to be filmed in his project and he does not think about the effects of human actions on the land. We may assume he is not as sensitive as Joe and he does not notice details Joe seems to pay attention to.

“Now we are on my home ground, foreign territory.” (9) is what the narrator thinks when they finally reach her place. Defining home a “foreign territory” may mean she feels estranged from her home, maybe because she has been away for a long time and she expected the place to be as she remembered it and she now feels betrayed by the changes. In addition, associating home with foreignness is problematic because home has to do with identity, with roots and it is an intimate space. Home is the place where we feel safe, but she cannot recognize that place as her home because to her it is a foreign territory. The idea of foreignness makes her throat constrict, “as it learned to do when” she “discovered people could say words that would go into” her “ears meaning nothing” (9). This may hint at the fact that she did not understand the language. Knowing that French and English are spoken in Canada and the narrator is an English-speaking person, we may infer she does not understand French and this makes her feel a foreign in her own country. It is likely that the area in which she lived was inhabited by French-speaking people and that English-speaking people were only a minority. However, she associates the feeling of being uncomfortable with being home and she wishes she could be deaf and dumb: in that way everything would be easier to her (9). As a result, division and separation seem to be two relevant themes of the novel: in fact, the characters crossed a border and language causes division between people inhabiting the same country. Moreover, the fact that she feels in the wrong place with Anna, David and Joe contributes to the feeling of distance the reader may detect between her and the other characters.

She can smell mill and sawdust as they are proceeding on the road and she can see “a ring of logs chained together”, travelling “to the saws in a clanking overhead chute” (9) and she observes this has not changed. They drive under it and they arrive at “the tiny

company town", embellished with flowerbeds and a fountain with "stone dolphins and a cherub with part of the face missing" (9). She reflects the statue "looks like an imitation, but it may be real" (9), perhaps she means an imitation of statues in touristic towns, since the outposts have become touristic attractions, or American towns, because the presence of American soldiers was visible during the journey. Anna is impressed by the fountain and the narrator explains it has been built by the company town and David comments "Rotten capitalist bastards" (9), which is similar to the comment he uttered when they previously passed by the silo and the rockets and sounds like a set phrase.

The narrator tells him to turn right, since she is the one who is giving directions, but instead of a road they face "a battered chequeboard" (10) which blocks the way. She did not expect the road to be blocked and they did not bring a map because she was sure they would not have needed it. She decides to ask for directions in a shop, so David drives along the main street, until they reach a shop selling magazines and candies. The woman inside the shop speaks English "with only a trace of an accent" (10), which may lead us to think she is a French native speaker, and she tells her she "must mean the old road" (10). The narrator is confused and surprised they closed the road she knew to build a new one and the feeling of uneasiness increases in her. She buys four vanilla cones for her and her friends to thank the lady for her directions and she realizes ice cream has changed as well. She used to eat it "rolled in pieces of paper which they would peel off like bark" (10), now that must be out of fashion, she reflects. She goes back to the car and tells David the directions, but she seems to feel estranged from herself. She is absorbed in her thoughts: "nothing is the same. I don't know the way anymore" (10) and she seems to be lost in her home ground, which does not resemble the one she had in mind because changes occurred in the time span she had been away.

She does not even know the way to the place where they are heading any longer and she starts panicking. She tries to concentrate on the ice cream, noticing it tastes of seaweed, but she cannot help but shake. "Why is the road different, he shouldn't have allowed them to do it, I want to turn around and go back to the city and never find out what happened to him" (10). She is feeling incredulous and this feeling is similar to the first one she felt at the beginning of the novel: she could not believe she was on that road again and now she cannot believe they built a new road. The "he" she is referring to may well be her father, since the aim of the journey is discovering if he is dead or alive and it is likely he was still living in the narrator's home place. But how could he prevent the building of a new road? We may think her father was a powerful figure in the town, a person who had the power to oppose such changes or perhaps he was considered omnipotent, almost like a god, by his daughter. However, thinking of parents as god-like creatures is typical of childhood and this is problematic for an adult.

Her fear is so strong she cannot think and she no longer wants to continue the journey or shed light on her father's disappearance. She is on the verge of crying because she realizes the place has changed and she is not in control of the changes, she is not in control of the direction the journey is taking. However, she is aware of the fact that her lover and her friends would not understand her and this is the only thing that prevents her from crying: "none of them would know what to do and neither would I" (10). So, she bites the ice cream and, for a minute, she only feels "the knife-hard pain" which hits the side of her face. "Anaesthesia, that's one technique: if it hurts invent a different pain" (10). For a moment, the cold anaesthetizes the side of her face so that she forgets about her fear. Apparently, anaesthesia is her way to approach fear and pain and the foreignness of her home ground because, after biting the ice cream, she affirms she is

alright. "Invention" is a key word in this quote because it is opposed to truth. She is inventing something to distract herself from a situation too much painful to face. She is in a conflicting emotional state and it is possible she is lying to herself in order to control her negative feelings. She is evidently not alright if she was on the verge of crying, but she wants us to believe the contrary. Maybe she is silencing something which is about to surface in her mind, but she is not ready to cope with it yet. Her inventing a different pain may be problematic for the reader, since s/he may start questioning the reliability of the narrator. Is she inventing or is it the truth that she is telling? Why does she need to invent?

When David finishes his ice cream, he throws the "carton-flavoured tip" out of the window of the car, demonstrating he is not environment conscious and he does not care if his behaviour is polluting the land. Once again, the impression we get about him is not positive and this also reinforces our hypothesis he is not a good character. They drive through a part of the town which has been freshly built and they notice "a clutch of children playing in the wet mud that substitutes for lawns; most of them are dressed in clothes too big for them, which makes them seem stunted" (11). This image depicts the poor conditions in which people live in the town and the fact that children are wearing "clothes too big for them" (11) reminds us of the episode evoked by the narrator at the beginning of the chapter, when she and her brother did not wear shoes for a winter because they had destroyed them during the summer. It seems poverty is still there in the town, despite the attempts of the company town to renew it and make it more attractive to tourists. Anna comments on the children saying there are a lot of them probably because the influence of the Church may be so strong that people do not use contraception. After saying so, she judges herself: "aren't I awful" (11), probably

because she did not mean to offend the narrator, being the town her home ground. David, on his side, continues speaking in clichés and utters “the true north strong and free” (11). As the car passes by, a couple of older children offer “tin cans towards the car” (11) and the narrator supposes they could be offering raspberries. However, they do not accept their offer and the narrator is looking passively out of the window, anaesthetized and pretending she is fine.

When the car arrives at a gas station along the new road, David catches the attention of his companions and tells them to look quickly as though the thing he is pointing will disappear. What he is pointing at are three stuffed moose standing on a platform near the pumps. Probably they had been placed there by the gas station’s owners in order to attract customers. The narrator observes “they are dressed in human clothes and wired standing up on their hind legs” (11). They are supposed to represent a family: the father-moose is smoking a pipe and wearing a “trench-coat”, the mother-moose is wearing a flower hat and a dress, the boy moose is wearing “short pants, a striped jersey and a baseball cap and is waving an American flag” (11). The narrator and Anna are still behind the men when they descend from the car in order to look closely at the stuffed moose, as they did when David and Joe filmed the bottle house. The narrator reaches David and tells he is supposed to buy some gas if he wishes to use the moose, since they are there to attract customers, but he does not answer, as though he has not heard her. Instead Anna points at a fourth stuffed moose which is standing on the roof, wearing a “frilly skirt and a pigtailed blonde wig, holding a red parasol in one hoof” (12).

David films all the moose, while the owner of the station is frowning at them, because they did not buy anything. Anna, Joe and David seem enthusiastic at the sight of the stuffed animals, conversely the narrator is the one who feels discomfort, maybe because the animals standing in human poses disturb her or because they have been killed and stuffed in order to resemble humans and this hints at the theme of senseless killing of animals, hunting and commodifying the land. Her reactions to what they see during the journey are negative, they express uneasiness, while the other three characters seem to enjoy the trip. In fact, back in the car she claims “those weren’t here before” (12), as though she is defending herself. Anna looks at her because she does not understand what the narrator means and asks naively “Before what?” (12). The reader may think before the new road was built, or before her father allowed this to happen as well as the building of a new road, before the changes. However, the narrator does not reply. This shows a distance between the narrator and the other characters. Indeed, the narrator does not seem to be willing to express her uneasiness to the others and they seem not to notice her discomfort.

The following paragraph describes the new road and the subsequent one measures the changes, comparing the new road to the old one. Indeed, “the new road is paved and straight, two lanes with a line down the middle” (12) and the narrator can notice a few advertisement signs and a crucifix “with a wooden Christ, ribs sticking out, the alien god, mysterious to me as ever” (12). This is the second reference to the Christian religion we are confronted with so far. It is common for the Christians to place a crucifix along a road in the precise place where an accident occurred. In addition, flowers are placed under the crucifix to pay homage to the victims of the accidents. We may infer that the town in which the protagonist grew up was under the influence of the Church and it

still is. However, despite this, the narrator defines Christ as “the alien god” and still a mystery to her. This piece of information may lead the reader to assume she was not taught to go to Church and maybe she did not attend catechism as a child. The reason may be that her family believed in a different creed or maybe they were atheists, for the time being we are not able to tell.

At some points, the old road intersects the new one and the narrator remembers it was “dirt, full of bumps and potholes” (12) and it was respectful of the land: it went “up and down the hills and around the cliffs and boulders” (12), while the new road cuts across the land. The following episode seems to surface unconsciously in the narrator’s mind, triggered by the fact of being on that road. What is interesting in this paragraph is the use of pronouns and possessives:

They used to go over it as fast as possible, **their** father knew every inch of it and could take it (he said) blindfolded, which was what **they** often seemed to be doing, grinding up past the signs that said PETITE VITESSE [...] the rest of **them** clamped onto the inside of the car, getting sicker and sicker despite the Lifesavers **their** mother would hand out, and finally throwing up groggily by the side of the road [...] if he could stop in time or out of the car window if he couldn’t or into paper bags, he anticipated emergencies, if he was in a hurry and didn’t want to stop at all. (12-13).

Apparently, she is referring to her family employing the personal pronoun “they” and, consequently, she is speaking of herself in third person as well, as if she wishes to distance herself from her family, or as if she is speaking of another person. This is the first memory of all the members of her family which she gives an account of. The

memory is about a journey, or several journeys, taking place on the old road and all of those journeys ended with the narrator and her brother vomiting, even though their mother tried to help them, because of their father's fearless driving.

However, she reflects: "that won't work, I can't call them 'they' as if they were somebody else's family. I have to keep myself from telling that story" (13). This sentence reinforces our idea of distance, because she is telling us she was recounting that episode as if the protagonists were another family, not hers. But she admits this is not a valid mode of approaching her memories, and she is attempting not to tell that story. Which story? Maybe she means the story of her family or it could be the repressed something she was trying to silence, thanks to the expedient of anaesthesia. Moreover, this quotation shows how the narrator is pausing to comment on her mode of narrating. This may hint at the fact that she is attempting to narrate this story and she is finding the best way for her to tell it. She gives the impression she is narrating for herself, not for a readership, she does not seem to be aware of the reader's presence. Maybe telling this story will help her somehow to face what she is trying to forget, because she does not seem to feel ready yet. In this context, telling her own story may be therapeutic and relevant to healing her discomfort.

Reflecting on the old road leads her to look for Lifesavers in her bag, although she does not need them this time, since the new road is made of pavement and then gravel, and David is a good driver. As she can see, the old road is fading behind grass and saplings and soon it will become hardly visible (13). The new road probably is the result of an improvement in infrastructures and, if the narrator was not so tense and in a conflicting emotional feeling, she would acknowledge it is faster and more comfortable

than the old road. Despite this huge improvement, when the road turns from pavement into gravel, David states humorously “Must have elected the wrong guy last time around” (13), but the narrator does not pay attention to his comments and instead, she focuses on the familiar smell “of road dust fuming behind and around us” and “gas-and-upholstery [...] of the car” (13).

David speaks again “Thought you said this would be bad, it’s not bad at all.” (13), but the narrator seems too absorbed in her thoughts to hear him. In fact, she is observing “the two roads joining here but widened” (13) and the result of human interference on the land: trees have been uprooted and their leaves are reddening because they are dead. Secondly, her eyes see the cliff on which palimpsests of election and advertisement slogans are painted and repainted, even though the previous ones have not completely faded away: “VOTEZ GODET, VOTEZ OBRIEN [...], THE SALADA, BLUE MOON COTTAGES ½ MILE, QUEBEC LIBRE, FUCK YOU, BUVET COCA COLA GLACE, JESUS SAVES” (13). The narrator describes them as a “mélange of demands and languages” (13) and the word “mélange” is an example of a language serving another, and it supports the idea of a complex and bicultural interpretation of reality. The cliff appears to be many-layered to the point that “an x-ray of it would be the district’s entire history” (13). Similarly, many layers of memory seem to overlap in the narrator’s mind, since, up to this moment, episodes from her childhood and scenes concerning her parents’ ageing have surfaced and a repressed material has attempted to emerge as well from the depths of her unconscious. The view of the lake, which is described in the following paragraph, which is the last one of the first chapter, could be associated with the unconscious and the emerging of memories from the past, of the surfacing of hidden material. In addition, water may be easily associated with purification and healing powers, so, we

may expect the protagonist to undergo a process of regeneration and finally solve the issues she seems to be avoiding to face so far.

The closing paragraph of the first chapter recounts the arrival of the characters to the lake. The narrator is still absorbed in her thoughts and her feelings of uneasiness are amplified, since she feels she has cheated because they “are here too soon” and she feels “deprived of something, as though” (14) she cannot reach the sight of the lake without suffering, like she did when her father used to drive. Indeed, she associates the sight of the lake to “tears and a haze of vomit” (14), as the lake is “blue and cool as redemption” and she does not find it correct to reach such salvation without any pain. Linking the lake to redemption and salvation confirms the aforementioned idea, which attributes healing powers to water.

After reading the first chapter, which follows the progression of the last part of a journey from the U.S.A. to Canada, the reader has constructed a provisional frame in which to position the characters and is expecting them to reach the destination of the journey, that is the narrator’s house. In addition, we have also formulated a meaning for the beginning of the story. Thanks to this close reading, we have attempted to prove how the meaning of a text depends on the order of presentation of the textual elements and to show how a story world takes shape. Had the elements followed a different order, we would have grasped a different meaning. However, we have to bear in mind that Atwood set “traps” in order to achieve a certain effect on her readership and not to reveal the whole meaning of the novel from the very beginning. At the moment we are able to state that the narrator is returning to her childhood place in Northern Canada, to

look for her disappeared father. A couple of friends and her lover are travelling with her and we have formed a precise impression of them.

We also are led to think she does not seem to feel ready to return and confront her lost parent and her childhood place. In fact, on her way back, she acknowledges the changes that occurred and this arises in her a feeling of betrayal and she narrates the current events in an impersonal and passive fashion. We have also detected that there is something wrong with the narrator, she is likely to have problems with her past and so far, we have noticed that memories which appear to come from the depth of her unconscious infringe the continuity of the simultaneous present tense in which the story is told. As a consequence, the narration appears to be disrupted and non-linear and it seems to be characterized by a back and forth movement, a plunge into the past and a return to the present for the protagonist. However, these memories are of utmost importance, since it is through them that the reader will know the story of the protagonist. These memories seem to force their way back to the present tense and they state the associative fashion in which the Surfacer's mind works. In addition, they take basic forms, they provide veritable intrusions in the present tense narration and the narrator seems not to be in control of them. As a consequence, their surfacing is unexpected for the reader as well as for the narrator who is tentatively trying to narrate her story.

From this analysis we can outline that the main metaphors of the novel are returning, which equals both a journey back in geography and back in time as well, due to the surfacing of memories, and change, since the narrator cannot recognize her home ground. Moreover, textual hints seem to suggest that the return to the place of her

childhood may take the shape of a quest for identity and for the narrator's self, which seems to have disappeared and faded as well. The disappearances, thus, may turn out to be two, the first, the father's, intertwined with the daughter's. We may expect her to come to terms with her deeper self in order to find her identity and her place in the world, since we have detected she is rather confused about who she is.

We may guess that the cause of this confusion is a trauma of some sorts, given the impression that some material has been removed from the narrator's memory because it was too painful for her to face. However, we cannot state which kind of experience traumatized her. The fact that she pauses to comment on her narration may hint at the fact that narrating her story may have a healing power for her and this may help her recover from the estranged, dissociated life she is living. Trauma seems to be in part responsible for the protagonist's loss of identity and in the following chapter we will attempt to shed light on the mystery surrounding her past and her identity.

From this first close reading, it also emerged that nature, environment and the land play a major role in this first chapter. The landscape is described through senses, but primarily we are exposed to what the narrator sees from the car's window: dead trees, tourist packs for excursions, tourist cabins and a military site. All these elements are disturbing to her but the new road is the most disturbing change she has faced during her journey to the point that she starts feeling sick and she has to invent a different pain to anaesthetize the previous one. The commodification of nature and the destruction of the land, together with senseless killing of animals appear to be relevant issues to the protagonist. We may expect nature to be there in the whole novel and its role may be important for the protagonist in her journey to her self. In fact, up to now, nature does

not seem to be only a scenery, but it is anthropomorphized and it seems to be in a victim position with human beings as victimizers. However, nature can also be wilderness which is dangerous and can kill, if one does not pay attention. The role of nature and its being both passive, commodified and victim and, conversely, its being wild will be analysed in the third chapter.

In the first chapter, a few references to the Christian religion have been made and the Indian component of the town in which the narrator spent her childhood has been mentioned. Religion, together with nature and trauma, would seem to be another relevant ingredient of the novel. Since her parents did not teach the narrator the principles of the Christian religion, we may assume they were either atheists or they believed in Shamanism. Indeed, the religion of the Indian tribes in Canada was Shamanism and we may expect it to be useful for the narrator in her process of appropriation of her identity, in understanding her truest self and in coming in contact with her deepest essence. The role of religion will be explored in the fourth chapter, together with the role of the protagonist's parents.

Chapter Two – Trauma: A Possible Interpretive Trajectory?

The first and the following chapters in the first section of *Surfacing* witness a sense of estrangement as far as the protagonist's narration is concerned. The events seem to be part of an interior monologue and the narrator appears to be suspended between the present tense in which she is telling what is going on and the past of the memories which come to the surface of her mind. At the beginning of the novel, the language is detached and the voice is impersonal. Both these elements seem to foreshadow the narrator's inability to feel and her attempt to be in control of her life. However, we shall see the order she is imposing on her life is false and the memories triggered by the exploration of the island on which she spent her childhood contribute to undermine her sense of herself. In addition, the exploration of the land progressively turns out to be a metaphor for the exploration of the protagonist's self. She gives the impression she is in a state of confusion and discomfort due to the repression of a trauma of some sorts, belonging to her past. As the journey progresses and the characters reach the island in the middle of the lake, she becomes increasingly detached from reality, alienated from her lover and her friends, affected by psychological dislocation which causes a division in her self, and her past experiences start to overtake her.

The first reference to her past experience occurs in chapter 2, when the protagonist meets Paul and his wife Madame, who were friends of her parents. In fact, Paul asks the unnamed protagonist if her husband is accompanying her to look for her mysteriously disappeared father and she answers affirmatively, "skipping over the lie" in her mind (24). She reflects "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 [...] 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" (24). In light of the analysis outlined in the previous chapter, we are able to construe an interpretative frame concerning the protagonist in which she has been married and has divorced and, since she is not willing to give explanation to people, she keeps on wearing her wedding ring. For this reason, she is ready to lie about the fact that Joe is her husband, while he is only her boyfriend, in order not to mention her previous divorce, which will not be understood by Paul and Madame, since they shared the same set of traditional values in which her parents believed.

We may enrich the frame in which we have positioned the narrator when a baby is mentioned. Indeed, the protagonist is "waiting for Madame to ask about the baby" (24) and she is prepared to answer she has "left him in the city; that would be perfectly true, only it was a different city, he's better off with" her husband, "former husband" (25). However, Madame does not refer to her child and the reader becomes aware of the fact that the narrator is a mother and she preferred leaving her child to her former husband in the city instead of bringing him/her with her and involving him/her in the search. This frame will function for the first half of the first section of the novel, then the reader will start having doubts concerning this frame, as we shall see later in this chapter.

In chapter 3, the narrator joins her friends and Joe at the motel where they were waiting for her while she was talking to Paul and his wife. She informs them she would like to spend a few days at the cabin on the island to look herself for clues of her father's disappearance. But, should he turn out to be alive, she does not want to meet him and she even does not want to let him know she had been on the island. As a matter of fact, she believes "there's no point" in meeting him or any other member of her family since

“they never forgave” her, “they didn’t understand the divorce”, she does not “think they even understood the marriage, which wasn’t surprising since”, she reveals, she “didn’t understand it” as well (32). The fact that she did not understand her marriage is another hint of her not being in control of her life and obeying someone else’s rules, in this case her former husband’s will. Then, she continues telling that the most shocking aspect of her marriage for her parents was the fact that it took place “so suddenly” and then she ran away, leaving behind both her husband and her child, together with her “attractive full-colour magazine illustrations, suitable for framing” (32). Her parents considered abandoning her child an “unpardonable sin” (32) and she did not try to explain her reasons to them because “it was no use”, they would not understand why she did not consider the baby to be her own. Thanks to these pieces of information, we are able to state that she had not been on speaking terms with her parents for a long time because they did not forgive her for leaving her child behind. What does not seem to be clear to the reader is why she does not recognize her child as her own.

I never identified it as mine; I didn’t name it before it was born even, the way you are supposed to. It was my husband’s, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was no more use. (38-39).

This quote from chapter 4 reinforces the idea expressed in the previous quote and it provides the narrator’s reasons to explain why she did not recognize her child as her own. It is interesting to notice that the narrator refers to her son/daughter as “it”, the “baby” or the “child” and she does not clarify if it is a boy or a girl and this is unusual for

a mother. The impression she gives is that of being considered an object (an incubator) by her husband in order to fulfill his desire of having a child, which was “imposed” on her, meaning she did not wish to become a mother in that specific moment of her life, but she was forced to bear a child in order to please her partner.

Consequently, this relationship appears to be similar to the one Anna and David share, in which the man dictates the rules and the woman is only a passive recipient, forced to act as her husband wishes her to. At the end of the chapter, the narrator reflects about Anna and David’s marriage and she supposes they should have a “special formula” to get on well. Conversely, meditating about her previous marriage, she expected to become part of a couple without her doing anything, “like the wooden man and woman in the barometer house at Paul’s” (46), who were “linked together and balancing each other”. However, after her marriage and committing “a paper act [...] he began to expect things, he wanted to be pleased” (47) and we may assume that this was exactly what the protagonist did.

In chapter 5 she describes the divorce as “an amputation, you survive but there’s less of you” (49) and this suggests the protagonist suffered when her relationship with her former husband ended and now she feels deprived of something. What she remembers about her former lover are only “crystal clear images enclosed by a blank wall” (55) and she is surprised to feel bitterness about him, since she was “the offending party, the one who left [...] He wanted a child, that’s normal” (56) and he wanted to be married with the protagonist. This quotation appears to be problematic because the narrator feels resentment about her former husband, but she was the one to put an end to their marriage and she even left her child behind.

When Anna mentions the fact that the protagonist is lucky because she does not have any children, we may assume that she does not contradict her because she is not willing to tell Anna about her child. And yet, we wonder how comes the narrator avoids to tell her about her child if Anna is her best woman friend. "I haven't told Joe either, there's no reason to. He won't find out the usual way, there aren't any pictures of it peering out from a crib or a window or through the bars of a playpen in my bureau drawer or my billfold" (57). Apparently, none of her friends and not even Joe are aware of the fact that she is a mother and she left behind her child and the reader may find strange that she does not own any pictures of her baby. She reflects "I have to behave as though it does not exist, because for me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget" (57).

It is also worth underlining the fact that she seems to have lived the birth of her baby like it was sliced off from her and the reference to the Siamese twin reminds us of Anna's hand-reading in the first chapter. In fact, the protagonist was told she has double lines on her palm, suggesting she might have had a twin and now she compares her baby to a Siamese twin that was artificially separated from her body. Maybe she had a cesarean and she lived it as a traumatic experience. As a consequence, this memory is so painful for her she forces herself to forget it. In addition, the idea of separation from her child is similar to the feeling conveyed when she states that experiencing a divorce is like undergoing an amputation: in both cases she feels as if she had been deprived of a limb and she had to recover in order to survive.

In the last few pages of the first section the narrator ponders about her memories and she decides she has to be “more careful [...] I have to be sure they’re my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: if the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I’ll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it” (90). This reference to invention as opposed to true memories reminds us of the first chapter, when the narrator used anaesthesia and invented a different pain in order not to suffer because she could not find her way on her home ground. She runs over her “version of it”, her “life, checking it like an alibi, it fits, it’s all there till the time” she “left. Then static, like a jumped track, for a moment” it’s lost, “wiped clean [...] To have the past but not the present, that means you are going senile” (90). This quotation makes clear that the narrator is constantly checking and correcting parts of her own story.

The word “alibi” is interesting because it is connected to the semantic field of crime and the fact that she needs one may be a hint of the fact she feels guilty, maybe because she rejected motherhood by abandoning her child, which was considered “an unpardonable sin” by her parents. The fact that she has a version of her life implies that there may be many versions of it, depending on the point of view and she is not sure if she can trust her memory, but she realizes “it’s all there” until she left, and this may be the “funny break” Anna detected in her palm in the first chapter. The narrator wants to make sure she is control of her memories and her past, but she does not seem to be in control of her present as well, since she does not say no when David proposes to stay at the cabin for a whole week. On the contrary, she appears to be increasingly alienated from reality and more and more immersed in her thoughts and her past experiences.

The impressions the reader can get from the memories of the unnamed narrator's marriage, divorce and delivery are clearly negative and s/he may start having doubts about the reliability of the protagonist. In fact, the reader is starting realizing s/he has been exposed to an unstable narrating voice, which will be shown in section 2, after Anna and the narrator have a conversation about the effects of the birth control pill, and a more explicit memory about her delivery surfaces in her mind.

After the first I didn't ever want to have another child, it was too much to go through for nothing, they shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and they tie your hands down and they don't let you see, they don't want you to understand, they want you to believe it's their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. After that they fill your veins up with red plastic, I saw it running through the tube. I won't let them do that to me ever again.

He wasn't there with me, I couldn't remember why; he should have been, since it was his idea, his fault. But he brought his car to collect me afterwards, I didn't have to take a taxi. (100-101).

This is the most accurate description of her childbirth we will be offered in the novel. However, it is challenging for the reader to distinguish between reality and the protagonist's fabrication, created in order to forget such a painful experience and replace her tormented memories. The presence of "technicians", "mechanics" and

“butchers” is not usually associated with childbirth and it increases the brutality of the act. In addition, the reference to the fork which takes the baby out of her womb, reminds us of the “knife-hard pain” of the first chapter, which recalls “the notion of pain caused by surgical intervention” (Papp 165). The further reference to anaesthesia reinforces the idea of undergoing a surgical operation.

If the reader was confused, now it is evident the narrator is telling the experience of an abortion and not the memory of a delivery. The reader is eventually offered an interpretive key: the abortion may well constitute the trauma that shaped her life, the “funny break” on her palm, the gap in her memories and the reason for her emotional death and estrangement from other individuals. The truth is that she underwent the termination of a pregnancy because her married lover demanded her to, since she refers to the abortion as “his idea, his fault” and she was traumatized by the separation from her unborn baby. As a consequence, she invented and fabricated another version of reality as a defensive strategy to cope with the pain and this is the best way for her to approach such an intolerably tormenting memory.

“The word ‘trauma’ comes from the ancient Greek meaning ‘wound’” (Marder 1), but this wound is peculiar since it is psychic and its effects are “repeated, uncontrollable and incalculable” (Marder 1). According to Van der Kolk, “traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threat” and the damage does not consist in the trauma itself, but in “how the individual’s mind and body react in its own unique way to the traumatic experience in combination with the unique response of the individual’s social group” (qtd. in Bloom 2). The traumatized person feels helpless towards a dangerous situation which overwhelms him/her. In fact,

a traumatic event affects the whole human being: trauma modifies how we think, learn, remember and feel both about ourselves and the others and even our way of making sense of reality. Traumatic experiences cause damage to both body and psyche with the result of fragmenting an individual's identity.

Trauma includes profound personal suffering after facing "an event outside the range of usual human experience" (Caruth 3). It causes disruption and gaps in the human experience and it escapes a clear definition. Indeed, trauma studies are multidisciplinary, as they involve psychology, psychiatry, literary studies, sociology, history. Literature and literary theory have given their contribution to trauma studies in recent years and the innovative approach these disciplines have brought constituted a groundbreaking impact on this field. For example, Cathy Caruth edited a collection of essays entitled *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and her work has been a guide line since 1995. In fact, she described trauma and its implications in a coherent and clear fashion and she acknowledged that "the (traumatic) event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is to be possessed by an image or an event" (Caruth 4-5). The lack of assimilation of the traumatic event gives rise to a disease named Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which consists in a response taking place in a second time "to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to stimuli recalling the event" (Caruth 5).

Apart from hallucinations and dreams, the nameless protagonist of *Surfacing* seems to be affected by these symptoms when recounting the experience of her abortion, it appears as if she is watching the scene in third person, since she is using the form of “you” and not the more obvious “I” to describe the event. This is due to her emotional absence during the event that results in its not being assimilated in the precise moment when it occurred, but only belatedly. In fact, the narrator is estranged from herself while she is in the clinic and only after the operation she starts realizing what happened to her. As a consequence, trauma has a “ghostly quality” since it can be comprehended “in terms of an absence” (Marder 2). In addition, this absent quality causes traumatized people to become “possessed” by the event, with the consequence of perceiving themselves as “living ghosts” (Marder 2) and progressively isolates the victim from other individuals, which is what is happening to the narrator in *Surfacing*, who tried to erase the memory of her abortion and replaced it with the false narrative of a civil wedding taking place at a post office in the company town near her childhood place and a subsequent divorce. These narratives allow her to imagine that her child is living with her former husband in the city, since she was not willing to grow him/her because she did not perceive him/her as hers while she was pregnant, because having a baby was her former husband’s will, not hers. In reality, her lover was a married man and he already had children, so he manipulated her to the point that she had to abort her child. We may infer that their relationship was uneven and that she was willing to become a mother, but she was not allowed to because her lover decided for her.

Indeed, after she refuses Joe’s proposal to stabilize their love relationship and get married, she realizes she does not feel awful for her refusal and this makes her realize she hadn’t felt “much of anything [...] for a long time” (134). It is like she is alienated

from a part of herself, that is from feelings and bodily sensations because avoiding to feel pain amounts to avoid to feel any other emotion. In fact, at the beginning of the second section, she claims that “the trouble is all in the knob at the top of or bodies” (95) and she is not

against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate. The language is wrong, it shouldn't have different words for them. If the head extended directly into the shoulders like a worm's or a frog's without that constriction, that lie, they wouldn't be able to look down at their bodies and move them around as if they were robots or puppets; they would have to realize that if the head is detached from the body both of them will die. (95)

The body is associated with feelings and emotions, while the head is the emblem of logic and rationalism. After the traumatic event took place in her life, she plunges in a state of unhappiness and numbness due to the loss of the connection to her body. As a consequence, she feels like she has committed an “emotional suicide” which led her to become insensible and she appears to be split into two, head and body being two separate instances (Rao 57).

At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head; since then everything had been glancing off me, it was like being in a vase, or the village where I could see them but not hear them because I couldn't understand what was being said. Bottles distort for the observers too: frogs in the jam jar stretched wide, to them watching I must have appeared grotesque.” (134)

According to Laing's study on the "schizophrenic splitting of the self", the narrator in *Surfacing* has erected a barrier between her "inner self and the self for others in order to protect what is felt to be the real true self" (Rao 57). In fact, none of the other characters know about her past and she is reluctant to communicate with them. As a result, her inner self is impoverished emotionally speaking and she has created a "false self" in order to interact with the outer world.

She reflects on her numbness and she thinks: "Perhaps I'd been like that all my life, just as some babies are born deaf or without a sense of touch; but if it was true I wouldn't have noticed the absence" (134). She decides then to look at family photograph albums and look at pictures that were taken of her former selves to see if her numbness left any changes on her face: "perhaps I would be able to tell when the change occurred by the differences in my former faces, alive up to a year, a day, then frozen" (136). As she browses the pages of the albums she cannot find anything visible which could determine when the change occurred, but she cannot recognize herself and she thinks the person on the pictures may well be the missing part of her. Moreover, she is not surprised not to see any picture of the wedding because they were not taken and because, as we shall see later, the wedding did not take place at all.

She gives in her search for her change and she concludes that she must have been alright up to the point pictures of her were collected in the albums, "but after, I allowed myself to be cut into two" and she assumes an accident took place and left her split into two. Since she is unable to feel any emotion, she is sure "the other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live" (138) and the person she is now is "the wrong half, detached, terminal [...] nothing but a head, or no, something like a severed thumb;

numb" (138). The protagonist's inability to "feel the emotions that would normally be expected" under certain circumstances is a mechanism of defense which is common in traumatized subjects and is called "emotional numbing" (Bloom 7). This process of dissociation may cause damage to a person's mental and physical health and even to relationships, as it is made clear when Joe asks the protagonist to get married: their relationship starts deteriorating. In fact, "over time, as people try to limit situations that promote hyperarousal and flashbacks, limit relationships which trigger emotions, and employ behaviors designed to control emotional responses, they may become progressively numb to all emotions and feel depressed, alienated, empty, even dead" (Bloom 6). In the light of this definition, it is clear why the narrator feels anaesthetized, fragmented and dead inside.

In order to recover from emotional numbness, traumatized individuals need language, words and a narrative to articulate their memories and give order to the traumatic events. In fact, memories concerning trauma tend to be characterized by feelings and sensorial elements, but not language (we shall see how memory works in the following paragraph). Sharing their own story with other people or a therapist may help patients to put a distance between the past of the trauma and the present in which the subject lives and to relegate the traumatic event in the past where it belongs. As a consequence, storytelling may constitute a powerful means as far as healing is concerned, and the whole novel may be regarded as a tentative and provisional account of the protagonist's trauma: the protagonist is trying to make sense of what happened to her and she is tentatively narrating what she can remember. However, she does not seem to distinguish between real and fabricated memories until the climatic moment occurs.

The only time in which the narrator tries to talk about her past is when Joe tells her they should get married and she is not willing to. In order to reinforce her opinion, she starts telling him about her past experience and she answers that she has been married once and “it didn’t work out” (111) and, most important, she mentions her baby. However, she stops and Joe only replies “It would be different with us” (111) and Joe ignores what the narrator said about her child. After referring to her previous marriage, she experiences a flashback of it and she estranges herself from the present once again.

As mentioned above, trauma affects our memories and our way of remembering. Scientific experiments have proved that there are two distinct memory systems in our brain: a normal one based on language and a nonverbal one. Under normal circumstances our memories “are based on words” and since our birth “we develop new categories of information, and all new information gets placed into an established category, like a filing cabinet in our minds” (Bloom 5). In fact, we think and communicate through language and “when we need to recall something, we go into the appropriate category and retrieve the information we need” (Bloom 5). However, when stress overwhelms us, our memory follows a different procedure.

According to Van der Kolk, the memory which is based on words is affected by high levels of stress and traumatic events and “under normal conditions, the two kinds of memory function in an integrated way. Our verbal and nonverbal memories are thus usually intertwined and complexly interrelated” (Bloom 5). What is relevant for this reading of *Surfacing* is that when fear takes control of our mind, we are no longer able to articulate a speech and describe our experience through language. As a consequence, the mind “shifts to a mode of thinking that is characterized by visual, auditory, olfactory,

and kinesthetic images, physical sensations, and strong feelings” (Bloom 5) and this seems to be what occurs to the protagonist when giving an account of her undergoing an abortion. All images, smells and feelings remain deeply imprinted in our brain, more than everyday events. Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux has named this kind of memory “emotional memory”, which has been demonstrated to be almost impossible to erase (Bloom 5).

The surfacing of memories which characterizes the novel may be explained through the concept of “engraving of trauma” (Bloom 6): problems are likely to subsist for a long time after the trauma occurred, due to the fact that the event took place in a stressful context and the subject does not remember it in the ordinary way, that is through language. Instead, the event stays “‘frozen in time’ in the form of images, body sensations like smells, touch, tastes, and even pain, and strong emotions” (Bloom 6). These engraved painful nonverbal memories may suddenly intrude on reality in the form of a flashback and the victim may be “overwhelmed with the same emotions that they felt at the time of the trauma” (Bloom 6). Flashbacks take place, for example, when the subject is put under pressure, is stressed or when a situation triggers the precise traumatic event with the consequence of having his/her mind overcrowded with images, sensations, sounds and smells connected to the trauma. In the whole process language is turned off and the memory remains nonverbal and impossible to be articulated through speech. This is what happens in *Surfacing*: the narrator never tells out loud the experience of her abortion and the memories to which we are exposed as readers take the shape of isolated images in which sensorial experience predominates. For example, she remembers smells and objects she saw during what she remembers as her wedding:

At my wedding we filled out **forms**, name, age, birthplace, blood type. We had it in a post office, a J.P. did it, **oil portraits** of former postmasters presided from the beige walls. I could recall the **exact smells, glue and humid socks** and the **odour of second-day blouse and crystallized deodorant from** the irritated secretary, and, from another doorway, the **chill of antiseptic**. It was a hot day, when we stepped out into the sun we couldn't see for an instant; then there was a **flock of draggled pigeons** pecking at the scuffed post office lawn beside the fountain. **The fountain had dolphins and a cherub with part of the face missing.**

'It's over,' he said, 'feel better?'

He **coiled his arms** around me, protecting me from something, the future, and **kissed me on the forehead**. 'You're cold', he said. **My legs were shaking** so much I could hardly stand up and there was an **ache**, slow like a groan. 'Come on' he said, 'we'd better get you home.' [...] He was talking to me as if I was an invalid, not a bride. [...] We walked through **the pigeons** and they **blew up around us**, confetti. In the car I didn't cry, I didn't want to look at him. 'I know it's tough' he said, 'but it's better this way'. (111-112)

As we could notice, this scene alludes to the same fountain the narrator saw in the first chapter, when passing by the company town before reaching the island. In addition, we may once more observe how her brain disguised the memory of her abortion as the memory of a wedding: for example, the fact that her "husband" was treating her like an invalid and that she was feeling like crying in the car after the ceremony are not usually associated with a wedding, which should be a joyful event. In

fact, later in the second section, we will be explained that the wedding/abortion did not take place at a post office,

not even a hospital, not even that sanction of legality, official procedures. A **house** it was, **shabby front room** with magazines, **purple** runner on the hall floor, **vines** and **blossoms**, the **smell of lemon polish**, **furtive doors** and **whispers**, they wanted you fast. Pretense of the non-nurse, her **armpits acid**, face powdered with solicitude. Stumble along the hall, from flower to flower, her criminal hand on my elbow, other arm against the wall. **Ring** on my finger. (183).

This passage shows how her memory was based on senses and fragmented images of visual items and not on language and this explanation occurs after the protagonist has dived into the lake to look for the drawings on rocks, which her father was studying and trying to take pictures of. Defining this as a memory, however, is inaccurate and it would be better to define it as a flashback, triggered by the visions the protagonist has when she is in the depth of the lake. In fact, language does not belong in this memory and the protagonist is not able to talk about her abortion, nor to think about it. The experience of a flashback is always involuntary and “when someone experiences a flashback, they do not *remember* the experience, they *relive* it.” (Bloom 6). It is also common for the person to forget the flashback due to the fact that emotional memory and verbal memory are disconnected from each other. On the other hand, memories are remembered, not lived again and language is usually a common feature in them. Memories may be voluntary but they also may be triggered by sensorial perceptions.

The moment in which she dives into the lake occurs in chapter 17, which is a central chapter in terms of revealing the truth which lies under the protagonist's version of reality. In this chapter, the issue of reliability returns and it becomes clear that her memories were fabrications and she invented a different version of her experiences in order not to face the sorrow, which is still there deep in her memory. Indeed, she tries more than once to dive into the lake and she succeeds only after a few attempts. What she sees is "a blotch, a shadow" and when she reaches the bottom of the lake, "the water seems to have thickened" (181). As she is floating under water she sees "a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was [...] a dead thing, it was dead" (182) and some emotions hit her: she feels fear and panic and she is about to scream. As she looks up to the canoe, she realizes another canoe has reached the middle of the lake and she returns to the surface. Her diving into the lake is almost an experience of death to her, since "the lake was horrible, it was filled with death, it was touching me" (182) and the shape she saw under water is likely to be the corpse of her drowned father, who had dived to look for the pictographs on the rocks in order to take photographs of them. After the protagonist has reemerged from the lake she is unable to speak and she lies on the bottom of the canoe, her eyes closed, to estrange herself from the outer world and make sense of what she has seen under water.

If formed again in my head: at first I thought it was my drowned brother, hair floating around the face, image I'd kept from before I was born; but it couldn't be him, he had not drowned after all, he was elsewhere. Then I recognized it: it wasn't ever my brother. I'd been remembering that had been a disguise.

I knew when it was, it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills, I couldn't let it out, it was dead already, it had drowned in air. It was there when I woke up, suspended in the air above me [...] and I thought, Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it. (182-183).

This is the most revealing passage in the novel, in which the body of the drowned father is first associated with the protagonist's brother, who almost drowned but was saved at the very last moment by their mother and then it becomes the image of her aborted child. She remembers she has seen him "under the water, face upturned, eyes open and unconscious, sinking gently; air was coming out of his mouth" (36), even though this happened before she was born, because she is convinced that "an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar" (36). The juxtaposition of the two images makes at this point clear that thinking about her brother's drowning was a disguise to approach the memory of her abortion, which is a kind of death that can be associated with water, the only difference is that her child "drowned in air" (183). Her sense of guilt is so strong she defines herself as a murderess and the baby she sees in her visions appears with animal features: it resembles a frog and it has fish characteristics and it reminds her both of an unborn baby in the mother's womb and of the creatures her brother used to catch and trap in bottles in his laboratory. As a result, the recurring image of the frog may be connected to her brother at the moment of being saved from drowning and to her aborted child, whom she believed she saw after the operation. In fact she explains

That was wrong, I never saw it. They scraped it into a bucket and threw it wherever they throw them, it was travelling through the sewers by the time I woke, back to the sea, I stretched my hand up to it and it vanished. The bottle had been logical, pure logic, remnant of the trapped and decaying animals, secreted by my head, enclosure, something to keep the death away from me. (183)

The protagonist admits she never saw her child and by now the reader knows she never married, nor divorced and she did not deliver, but she underwent an abortion. In reality, she had an unsuccessful affair with her married art professor, who forced her to undergo an interruption of pregnancy. He was not even with her during the operation because his children, “the real ones” (184) were celebrating a birthday party. Her lover only collected her afterwards. Their relationship came to an end following the abortion and, since the pain for the loss of her child was so heavy for her to face, she invented a different version of her past to replace her haunted memories. In fact,

It was all real enough, it was enough reality for ever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over the wrong parts. A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I'd lived until now. (184)

She also admits that “it wasn't a wedding, there were no pigeons, the post office and the lawn were in another part of the city” (184) and the fountain as well did not belong

in the place where the abortion took place, but she added it “so there would be something of mine” (184).

Another relevant aspect of the false story the narrator provides in order to disguise her trauma, is the fact that she identifies herself with the role of the passive and harmless victim, who is not in control of her life. Indeed, she projects guilt for causing her inner death outside her on her married lover and the doctors and nurses who operated the abortion. In fact, she stated her lover “imposed the child” on her, “it was taken away” from her, “exported, deported” “sliced off” from her “like a Siamese twin”, she “was emptied, amputated [...] they had planted death” in her “like a seed” (184). Moreover, she seemed to depict herself as a victim, “always waiting for others to cause some disaster that ruins her life [...] a helpless, powerless female in relation to the demands imposed on her by society” (Staels 52). In fact, she asserts it was normal for her husband to wish to become a father and get married, but she felt like “jumping off a cliff [...] in the air, going down, waiting for the smash at the bottom.” (57).

However, she starts contemplating her active role in aborting her fetus when she says she did not allow it to become a child, but he could have been one and, consequently, a strong sense of guilt arises in her. She believes her whole life has been a failure: she failed in her previous love relationship and she failed to oppose her former lover’s will to terminate her pregnancy. This sense of failure was what prevented her from returning home, in fact she thinks “I couldn’t go there, home, I never went there again, I sent them a postcard. They never knew, about that or why I left. Their own innocence, the reason I couldn’t tell them; perilous innocence, closing them in a glass [...] They didn’t teach us about evil, they didn’t understand about it, how could I describe it to

them?" (184). As we saw in the first chapter, the protagonist's family would never have forgotten her "unpardonable sin", namely the abortion, because they would not have understood it. "They were from a different age, prehistoric, when everyone got married and had a family [...] remote Eskimoes or mastodons." (185). The fact she compares her parents to mammoths and she depicts them as belonging to prehistory reminds us of the first chapter and reinforces the idea of a generational gap, which occurred in the early 1970s.

He said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't a person, only an animal; I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said no but I didn't; that made me one of them too, a killer. After the slaughter, the murder, he couldn't believe I didn't want to see him any more; it bewildered him, he resented me for it, he expected gratitude because he arranged it for me, fixed me so I was good as new; others, he said, wouldn't have bothered. Since then I carried that death around inside me, layering it over, a cyst, a tumour, black pearl. (185)

In these last lines of her reflection and her making sense of the vision she had in the depths of the lake, her taking responsibility for her act is more evident. Indeed, she acknowledges her participation in killing "the matrix of life energy and creative energy" (Staels 58) and "her complicity in amputating a dimension of herself" (Staels 59). She also compares the killing of the baby to killing an animal which found shelter inside her body and the loss of it is symbolic for the loss of her animal part. In fact, the baby stands

for “intuitive insight, vitality, personal affections and bodily sensations” (Staels 56) and the killing of it represents the killing of all these elements. As a result, she is disconnected to her body, she is unable to feel and she feels dead inside. The baby may also be interpreted as her shadow or twin, who lies under the surface of the lake, which is a symbol for her unconsciousness.

Thanks to plunging into the lake she also plunges into “the irrational, timeless and speechless dimension of the unconscious” (Rao 58-59) and re-awakens the abortion story. Now, she is finally able to heal from her state of amnesia and she regains her repressed memories and this will be the first step of her spiritual journey towards restoring her fragmented self, recuperate her lost identity as a mother and reconnect to her repressed past. By immersing into the lake, she emerges as a purified creature and she will be able to forgive herself and change her role from a passive victim position to an active role in her life. In fact, it is precisely in the depth of the lake that she will find the “power of the gods [...] and the power which resides in the unconscious” (Rao 59) and she recognizes the disguise of the “paper house”.

When she goes back to the cabin, she almost feels she is a different person and she looks at it with different eyes, as though the half of the protagonist “that had begun to return was not yet used” (189) to live again. Now she is able to remember the reason why her lover gave her the golden ring she wears on her left hand and she looks at it like it is a souvenir. In fact “he gave it to me [...] it got us into the motels easier, opener of doors” (189). Similarly, she can see clearly that her relationship meant much for her, but it meant less for the married art professor since “for him I could have been anyone, but for me he was unique, the first [...] I worshipped him, non-child-bride, idolater, I

kept the scraps of his handwriting like saints' relics, he never wrote letters, all I had was the criticism in red pencil he paperclipped to my drawings." (190). In fact, he stated he did not want their affair to influence his job or "anything", their relationship had "to be kept separate from life" (190). However, she did not invent the fact that he loved her, the problem was that he was married and the reason why he could not give her more than an affair were "his wife and children" and he asked her to be "mature" and understand (190).

The nameless protagonist of *Surfacing* also fabricates a fictitious memory of her parents, as we saw in the first chapter, depicting them as fixed in time and never ageing, "like mammoths frozen in a glacier" (6) because "they have no right to get old" (5). In so doing, she is erasing the true memory of them "to the extent that she thinks of them as if they were somebody else's" family (Rao 58) when she is recalling the episode of their journeys by car when her father used to drive. As she does not accept the loss of her aborted child, she does not accept the loss of her parents as well and she refuses to admit they died and left her alone. In fact, her mother died of cancer and the last memory she has of her is when she visited her at the hospital. As for her father, she prefers thinking he went insane instead of contemplating the possibility of his death by land because "he knew too much, he was too careful" (54). It is only when she plunges into the lake and sees his corpse that acceptance of the loss starts arising in her and her process of recovery begins.

By returning to her family cabin on the island, she starts recognizing there is something wrong with her memories and it is clear that she is a subject suffering from severe psychic repression which may be explained through the Freudian concept of

“repression”. However, in this case, the unconscious material is not radically excluded from consciousness, because it finds the way to force its way back to the protagonist’s consciousness. The painful content is repressed and substituted with stories she imposed herself to believe in.

According to Freud, the ego activates an unconscious and automatic mechanism of defense when it recognizes a certain content as a danger and it pushes it back in the unconscious, censoring it and forbidding its access to the conscious in order to avoid a situation considered dangerous for the subject. To maintain the repressed material in the unconscious, the subject uses an amount of psychic energy. The parts surviving the censorship are incomprehensible to the subject, who, as the protagonist of *Surfacing* did, invents stories to fill the gaps left blank by censorship. Thus, “the ego fends off the danger by the process of repression” (Psychoanalysis online). However, it is possible that the repressed material is reawakened in form of dreams or visions which are almost unrecognizable for the subject. This is called “the return of the repressed” (Psychoanalysis online) and the protagonist so far had a vision of her aborted fetus and we shall see she will have visions of her parents as well.

“Since then I’d carried that death around inside me, layering it over, a cyst, a tumour, black pearl” (185).

This quotation reminds me of a short story written by Atwood and published in the collection *Wilderness Tips* in 1991, “Hairball”. The protagonist of this short story, Kat, works as a lifestyle writer and editor and she is aware of the fact that the advice she regularly writes in her magazines are empty because she is selling a false model of womanhood. She is depicted when recovering from a surgical operation, since she had

an ovarian cyst removed which seems a small hairy monster as big as a coconut: “the hair in it was red [...] there were little bones in it too, or fragments of bone [...] there was a scattering of nails, toe or finger. There were five perfectly formed teeth” (Wilderness Tips 40). The description of this ovarian cyst, which turned out to be a benign tumour, is characterized by personification to the extent that Kat decides to keep it in a jar, place it on the mantelpiece and name it Hairball. In fact, the doctor speaks to her “as if breaking the news to a mother about a freakish accident to her newborn”, and she thinks about it in a disturbing fashion: “it was hers, benign, it did not deserve to be thrown away” (Wilderness Tips 40), but her married lover and boss finds the sight of Hairball disquieting.

While Kat is home to recover from the operation, she reflects about her past and about Hairball. In fact, “she’d asked the doctor if it could have started as a child, a fertilized egg that escaped somehow and got into the wrong place” (Wilderness Tips 54) but this was not the case. However, her question, together with the fact that she gives a name to her ovarian cyst, may suggest her desire for motherhood which could not be fulfilled because of this affair and because of her career as a fashion artist, which would not allow her to have any children and sacrifice her life for her job. In fact, soon after the operation she is made redundant by Gerald, who takes her position, implying that the field of fashion does not allow you to take any break.

Another possible explanation is that Hairball could be “a kind of tumour [...] present in seedling form from birth, or before it” or “it might be the woman’s undeveloped twin” (Wilderness Tips 54) which opens the possibility for Kat to think about a parallel life, maybe a life in which she remained in London instead of choosing Toronto for her

lover. However, “what they really were was unknown” (Wilderness Tips 54) and “many women had them [...] nobody knew why” (Wilderness Tips 39), but Kat still looks at it as an unborn child. “It has come out of her, after all. It is flesh of her flesh. Her child with Gerald, her thwarted child, not allowed to grow normally. Her warped child, taking its revenge” (Wilderness Tips 55). In other words, Kat thinks Hairball is the product of her sick relationship with her boss: a little monster was the only child that she could have conceived. In a feverish state she also speaks to it and tells it “only a mother could love you” and she starts crying. She also imagines Hairball’s response, a silent one and “what it tells her is everything she’s never wanted to hear about herself” (Wilderness Tips 55), which could possibly be once again her desire to become a mother and a wife instead of just a lover or ‘the other woman’. In fact, she admits to herself “she wants to be in that silver frame” at Ger’s house, “she wants the child. She’s been robbed” (Wilderness Tips 52).

The little hairy monster in a jar resembles the animals that the protagonist’s brother in *Surfacing* used to catch and trap in similar jars, since it is as helpless as the other trapped creatures. Moreover, the fact that Hairball may be an unborn baby makes it similar to the creature the protagonist of *Surfacing* sees in her vision while she is in the depths of the lake. Kat also states Hairball did not have the possibility to grow, like the aborted baby of *Surfacing*. Another similarity is that Hairball was taken out from Kat’s body under the effect of anaesthesia, like the baby was taken out with a fork from the protagonist’s womb in *Surfacing*. Both protagonists share their desire for motherhood and they both cannot fulfill it, but in *Surfacing* the protagonist will have a second chance. In fact, during the last night she, Anna, David and Joe spend at the cabin, she manages to conceive a child with Joe and this scene depicts a moment of redemption

and rebirth for the protagonist: "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds." (209).

However, despite the fact that Kat and the protagonist in *Surfacing* are both involved in an affair with a married man and are 'the other woman', Kat is a different woman from the narrator in *Surfacing*, who abandons her passive attitude towards other characters only after diving into the lake and starting her recovery from her emotional numbness. Conversely, Kat immediately reacts in a strong way for being fired, for Gerald's disgust for Hairball and for him choosing his wife Cheryl over her. In fact, at the end of the short story, she sends Hairball disguised as a gift, instead of going herself, to the party Gerald is having at home because "it's right that Gerald should have it; after all, it's his child too" (Wilderness Tips 56). "Drained and dried, powdered (with cocoa), party-dressed in pink tissue paper, and boxed up as the best chocolate truffles in Toronto" (Davidson 183-184) Hairball stands for "a parodic version of Kat's and her lover's striving after similar surface effect" (Davidson 184) and it obtains revenge for Kat. In fact, bearing in mind the two explanations for Hairball, Kat is meaning both that Gerald should take care of his "thwarted child" and he is also offered an alternative which is Kat's unborn twin. "Perhaps you might prefer my sister [...] She is a wild woman as well – witness all that tangled hair – but a much more restrainable and containable one. Put her on a shelf and she will stay there." (Davidson 184).

In the end, Kat acted like she always did, that is in a transgressive manner in order to shock people, but she did not obtain her job back, nor her relationship and she also lost

Hairball. The ending of the short story is open and the focus is the reflection which occurs in a moment in which Kat is vulnerable and in the last phase of personality disintegration. In fact, she reinvents herself in a progressively divesting way. She was “a romanticized Katherine” as a child, “a bouncy, round-faced Kathy, with gleaming freshly washed hair and enviable teeth” at high school, “Kath, blunt and no-bullshit in her Take-Back-the-Night jeans and checked shirt” at university and “when she ran away to England, she sliced herself down to Kat” because “it was economical, street-feline, and pointed as a nail.” (Wilderness Tips 42-43). Even though the protagonist of “Hairball” has a name, the above mentioned aspect also makes her similar to the protagonist in *Surfacing* who is unnamed and is in search for her identity. However, as we shall see, she will be able to re-appropriate for herself the missing parts of her identity as a mother and a wife and nature and shamanism will play a major role in this inner journey.

Chapter Three – Nature: A Mirror for the Self?

From the very first lines of the novel we can observe that nature is personified and is depicted in a state of suffering, indeed the “white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south” (3) and the lake, which used to be wild, is now being sold to be explored by foreign tourists. In fact, “the marks of contemporary civilization, with its power to intrude into the land, to destroy and desacralize, are everywhere” (Hatch 191). For example, stuffed moose standing on their hind legs and dressed like humans are used to attract customers at a gas station, elms are dying, signs have bullet holes shot by hunters, the old road which was respectful of natural features has been closed and a new pavement road that cuts across hills and vales has been built.

Moreover, in this chapter the narrator refers to the American ‘invasion’ of Canada, represented by what looks like an innocent hill, but which in reality is “a pit the Americans hollowed out” (6) to place rockets and the buildings where soldiers lived. We shall see that their presence on Canadian soil is relevant in the context of commodification and exploitation of nature and, throughout *Surfacing*, images conveying the destruction of wilderness, the senseless killing of animals and the commodification of earth are scattered everywhere along the book and they contribute to convey a disturbing feeling in the protagonist as well as in the reader.

In the first section of the novel, the nameless narrator feels disoriented and betrayed by the changes that have occurred in the nine years she has been in the city and away from her childhood place to the point that she defines her home ground a “foreign territory” (9) and she blames her father for having allowed so many changes to take place. When she wanders around the village on the border of the lake, she is expecting

to feel nostalgic but nothing happens and she focuses instead on the mysterious disappearance of her father, who is believed to be either lost or dead. Her father was an experienced woodsman and entomologist who knew the land and was able to be safe in the wilderness, in fact “he knew too much, he was too careful” (54) to die in the wilderness. In fact, in *Surfacing* and in Canadian literature more generally, nature seems to be “dead, hostile or indifferent” (Rao 7) and the wilderness is so dangerous it kills. Indeed, only a tiny mistake is enough to die and usually people drown or freeze; these deaths are called “death by nature” (Rao 7). Alternatively, the character who spent a long time alone in the wilderness goes mad and s/he is believed to be “bushed,” in fact this is what the trappers say “when you stay in the forest by yourself too long” (73). The narrator prefers thinking her father went mad because she does not accept the fact that he could be dead, since, as Paul states “your fadder, he knows the bush” (19) and she believes she is the only one who is able to find out the truth, by deciphering the clues and solving the mystery of his disappearance, because she is his daughter and she thinks “it will be different if I look myself” (26).

After reaching her family cabin on the small island in the middle of the lake, she acts like her father used to when she was a child, namely teaching her how to be safe in the land and giving her instructions. Similarly, she tells Anna, Joe and David what to do, since “they seem to be waiting for me to tell them what comes next” (37) and this is a way for her to avoid to feel the absence of her parents, which is so painful she is silencing it, as we saw in the previous chapter. From the very first moment when she enters the cabin, she is looking for hints and she is determined to solve the enigma. In fact, these chapters are characterized by the vocabulary typical of detective fiction such

as “watch”, “look”, “examine”, “scan”, “check”, “verify” and she is willing to explain her father’s disappearance through logic and reason, as he would have done.

While examining the surface of the island, she avoids to look for clues into the wilderness and she sticks to the path her father traced. Wilderness may be associated with the unknown and the unconscious and the protagonist’s decision not to consider it strengthens the fact that she wants to explain everything through logic and reason, like her father used to do, since he strongly believed in the reason of the Enlightenment. However, her search ends in failure and she thinks “no one can expect anything else from me. I checked everything, I tried; now I’m absolved from knowing” (61) and she wishes to go back to the city and forget about this story. Not being able to decipher the clues and solving the mystery of her father’s disappearance is for her a further defeat, since she experienced the failure of her previous affair with her art professor, she was not able to become a mother because of the abortion and she distanced from her family. In fact, after following a different path she explains “I needed to finish, I had never finished anything” (170) and this will give her the strength to dive into the lake and find the truth about her father and herself.

During their stay on the island, the narrator organizes the activities and gives directions to her lover and her friends, since they are not used to live on a remote island immersed in the Canadian bush, as she is. After David decides to spend a whole week on the island and the others agree, they pick blueberries, they pull out weeds, they cut wood and do similar tasks which Joe, Anna and David find quite interesting and exciting, but which for her are very common. It is also relevant to notice that if nature was characterized by illness and plants seemed to be affected by cancer on the border

between the USA and Canada, on the island the vegetation does not seem to have been affected by the disease yet. As a matter of fact, the protagonist can observe that “the disease hasn’t yet hit this part of the country” (41) and the white birches are still healthy. However, we shall see that the disease spreading from the South is a metaphor to explain the attitude of Americans towards the land. In fact, they act like an incurable virus which destroys both the land and the animals, leaving the earth devastated and desolated.

On the one hand, the unnamed narrator silences the initial sense of disorientation by concentrating all of her energy on the search for her father. As the story progresses, she identifies with the role of a passive victim who never acts but is always acted upon. In fact, she remembers that, as a child, she always followed her father’s rules and when she narrates episodes of her previous affair with her art professor, she states she has been seduced by him and when she found out she was pregnant, she was forced to abort her baby, it was “his idea, his fault” (101). In other words, she believes she has been victimized in her previous relationship up to the point of undergoing an abortion which she perceived as a mutilation and a killing, even though her lover never considered the baby as a person, but “only an animal” (185) and this is the origin of her anxiety and her fear of intensifying her current relationship with Joe. In addition, she remembers she has been a fated victim since childhood, when the other children did not accept her diversity and they played jokes on her, in fact “they could try out the tricks and minor tortures they’d already used up on each other” (88). She thinks she was “socially retarded” (Atwood, 1972:89) and uncivilized, and due to the fact that she often changed school, she was always isolated and she aroused “disgust and pity” (88) in the others.

However, her considering herself a fated victim amounts to say that she denies her responsibility for her choices and she considers herself as blameless.

As a consequence, perceiving herself as a victim, she feels sympathy for those she considers victims as well such as Anna, who is continuously victimized and humiliated by her husband David, the small animals used as baits in order to fish, the fish David fished and which she has to kill because none of the others knows how to do it, her aborted fetus, the dead heron she will encounter while looking for the rocks her father was studying and the frogs and all the animals trapped in jars her brother used to catch and collect for his senseless and cruel experiments, which he performed in his secret laboratory. The relationship between her victimization and, more generally, the victimization of women will be examined later in this chapter, together with the exploitation of nature.

In chapter 7, David proposes to go fishing after supper and the narrator digs the soil in order to catch some worms, they scramble but she puts them in a can and holds her hand on the top. She can sense that “already they’re nudging with their head ends, trying to get out” (75). She also catches a frog in case the worms are not enough to fish and she puts it in a jar. “Worm can and frog bottle, knife and heap of bracken fronds for the fish to bleed on” (75-76), it seems the protagonist is preparing the canoe for a sacrifice. Then, she loops a worm to David’s hook and she sees that “both ends twirl” (76). Anna is disgusted while the narrator does not seem to feel anything, instead she remembers what her brother used to say when they went fishing and hooked worms: “It doesn’t hurt them [...] they don’t feel it”, they squirm because of “nervous tension” (76) not because they are suffering. In the silence on the surface of the lake, she can also

hear the frog trying to jump out of the jar and hitting the lid, in a desperate attempt to escape. After two worms are eaten by the fish, the protagonist decides to use the frog, “the ultimate solution, and hook it on securely while it squeaks” (76). Apparently, Anna cannot stand seeing animals suffering and she exclaims “God you’re cold blooded” (ibid) to the narrator, who finds herself to play the role of her father or her brother, since she remembers “other people always did that for me” (76).

This episode triggers some memories of when she went fishing with her father and brother and we can see she already was trying to silence a sense of guilt arising in her when they killed animals to get food or for sport. She used to think the fish she caught “had chosen to die and forgiven” her “in advance” (76). In fact, when David lifts the fish out of water, she gives him the knife and she suggests that he “hit it back of the eyes” because she would “rather not kill it” herself (79). However, she has to perform the deed because David is not able to kill the fish. She hits it “quickly with the knife handle, crushing the skull, and it trembles stiffly all over, that’s done it” (79). The sense of guilt surfacing from within the protagonist is silenced again by the joy of the others, who are laughing and exulting like they have won a war. Consequently, she feels glad they are happy and she analyses carefully the fish when they ask her information about it. Her attitude in this situation demonstrates she is wearing the shoes of her father and , therefore, she is acting like him, namely classifying animals and plants, always in control of the situation and making decisions. In fact, she is also the one who decides to cook it for breakfast on the following day.

On the other hand, when she rinses her hands and the knife of the blood of the fish she starts feeling sick and she reflects: “it’s because I’ve killed something, made it dead;

but I know that's irrational, killing certain things is all right, food and enemies, fish and mosquitoes; and wasps" (80). In this passage, we can notice that she has always thought killing animals was cruel, but her father reassured her they were fishing because they needed to eat and they were living on a deserted and remote island in the middle of a lake. It was a matter of surviving and they only killed what they needed to eat. After this reflection, she is brought back to reality by David, who wants to fish again: a few more worms are sacrificed to satisfy his lust for sport, but he does not succeed. Furthermore, when David sees the guts of the fish, he immediately wants to film them for his documentary, showing no sign of compassion towards the death of the animal, which has been sacrificed so that they could eat it and have fun while fishing.

When a couple of American men approaches them on the lake, the unnamed narrator refuses to tell them they have caught a fish, because "they're the kind who catch more than they can eat and they'd do it with dynamite" (81). In fact, one of them throws a cigarette in the lake and the other states his wish to go to Florida because of the lack of fish, demonstrating they are insensible towards nature. The narrator remembers they (Canadians) "used to think they (Americans) were harmless and funny and inept and faintly lovable" (81), in reality, they are associated with sharks (80) and they are disposing of the land, exploiting it and hunting for sport. In fact, the protagonist warned David, Anna and Joe "not to say anything about the fish: if they do, this part of the lake will be swarming with Americans, they have an uncanny way of passing the word" (87), showing she is diffident towards them, who "can't be trusted" (238).

The following day, the nameless narrator cooks the fish and once again the reader is reminded that "this was never my job; someone else did it, my brother or my father"

(84). Again, her role towards Anna, David and Joe resembles the role her father used to play during her childhood. The reader may assume she had a passive role with the members of her family and that she did not consider herself capable of killing a fish or cooking it, even though she had learned from her father how to do it. However, she never decided to act as a guide for the others, it happened to her because she is the one who knows the most about wilderness and surviving and she recalls what her father taught her, as a child.

At the beginning of the second section, the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* acknowledges a clear distinction and a distance she can perceive between herself and the others. In fact, she ponders about “what I was and what they were turning into” (95). While she is reflecting, she is still lying in bed while the others are awake and she can hear their voices and their robotic movements and the “canned laughter, they carry it with them, the midget reels of tape and the On switch concealed somewhere in their chests, instant playback” (96). This quotation refers to the fact that David, Anna and Joe are slowly turning into robot-like creatures and she feels progressively uncomfortable in their presence. In fact, in section three she acknowledges the transformation of the others is complete and she has noticed that “the machine is gradual, it takes a little of you at a time, it leaves the shell [...] They did it to each other also, without knowing.” (214). In addition, as the story develops, she will assimilate her companions to the “Americans” who are using technology to exploit and destroy “the Canadian wilderness” (Cooke 59).

“American” invaders in *Surfacing* are depicted like grotesque and almost inhuman colonizers and are characterized by a “threatening and thoughtless behavior” (Cooke

60) towards the earth, as we saw when the characters first encountered them on the lake. They are “agents of destruction” (Rao 7) and the narrator perceives them as predators who brutally exploit the land. In chapter 11 Paul and an American arrive on the island. The American, Bill, shows interest in purchasing the island to create a retreat for the members of the association he is part of, namely the Wildlife Protection Association of America, and the narrator immediately thinks of a “snooping base [...] bird-watchers, binoculars [...] this is the kind of place that will be strategically important during the war” (122-123). The narrator refuses his generous offer because she believes her father could still be alive and because she is not willing to sell the Canadian wilderness to the Americans, who will hunt, fish and desecrate the land because they are not capable of taking care of it and of the wildlife as she or her father are. In fact, she thinks “they’re running out of water, clean water, they’re dirtying up all of theirs” (123) and this is why they need to expand into Canada. However, Bill represents the Wildlife Protection Association of America and his project may not be dangerous for the land, since the aim of the association is to preserve wildlife.

At this point of the novel, she still thinks Canadians are in a passive position towards Americans, who are buying the land and disposing of it, taking for granted it will always regenerate and recover from the damage they are causing. However, she will be shocked when she will discover that the couple of men she encountered on the lake after fishing for the first time are actually Canadians. What is worse is that they act like Americans and they are destroying the earth without considering the consequences. As a result, the narrator makes a connection between the disease spreading from the south, which is killing white birches, and the Americans with their consumerism mentality

who are coming from the USA and are infecting Canadians like a contaminating germ and she starts worrying about being infected herself.

In fact, in chapter 13, when the narrator, Anna, David and Joe are on their way to find the petroglyphs her father was trying to replicate on paper, they find traces left by humans: "someone had built a fireplace already, on the shore ledge of bare granite; trash was strewn around it, orange peelings and tin cans and a rancid bulge of greasy paper" (140). The unnamed protagonist compares them to "dogs pissing on a fence, as if the [...] unclaimed land, compelled them to leave their signature [...] and garbage was the only thing they had to do it" (140). At that sight, she cannot but collect the trash and put it on a side to burn it afterwards, since this is the only thing she can do to repair the damage the Americans did to nature. However, the most desecrating act they perform on the island is the killing of a heron, whose rotting corpse they encounter while walking through the bush, on their journey to the rocks.

It was behind me, I smelled it before I saw it; then I heard the flies. The smell was like decaying fish. I turned around and it was hanging upside down by a thin blue nylon rope tied around its feet and looped over a tree branch, its wings fallen open. It looked at me with its mashed eye. (147)

The dead heron may constitute a symbol of the emotional death of the protagonist, as well as the recurring fish images, all, in a way or another, connected to fertility. Her participating to killing the fish, amounts to her participating in aborting her child and limit her own fertility, which is an act of violation of the sacredness of nature. As a matter of fact, the dead heron also represents the victimization of nature performed by

the Americans. In fact, the poor animal had no chance to fight against the technology of the “happy killers” and the narrator wonders why they felt the need to slaughter it.

David and Joe want to film it for their project and they are indifferent towards the unmotivated pain caused to the animal by humans. Conversely, the protagonist feels pity for the bird. “It’s a heron. You can’t eat them.’ I couldn’t tell how it had been done, bullet, smashed with a stone, hit with a stick. This would be a good place for herons [...] They must have got it before it had time to rise.” (148). Apart from not understanding the reasons of the deed, the narrator does not even understand “why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn’t they just throw it away like the trash?” (149). The only answer she can find is “to prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless: beautiful from a distance but it couldn’t be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it” (149), like the stuffed parts of animals they hung like trophies on the walls of their houses.

Leaves brushed, branches pushed into the corridor of air over the trail as though preventing. Newly broken stubs, wood and pith exposed like splintered bones, ferns trampled, they’d been here, their tractor-tread footsteps dinting the mud path in front of me like excavations, craters.
(149).

The traces Americans leave behind bespeak their attitude towards the earth and the animals and the narrator cannot get out of her mind the dead heron and what has been done to it. She wishes she had buried it (151) because she acknowledges the sacredness of the bird’s life, which has been senselessly sacrificed, and a feeling of hatred towards

Americans starts surfacing in her: "I wished evil towards them. Let them suffer, I prayed, tip their canoe, burn them, rip them open" (158). The protagonist seems to address the gods of nature so that they could restore the balance and make the "happy killers" suffer and pay for the killing of the heron.

In the same chapter, David wants to fish again, but this time the experience is disturbing for the protagonist at the point that she refuses to kill the fish. "It spat water from its undershot jaw with a hissing sound; it was either terrified or enraged, I couldn't tell which" (153). The narrator perceives fishing as a wrong act and she interprets the "hissing sound" as fear or rage and because of her sensibility towards the animal she cannot kill it. "I couldn't any more, I had no right to. We didn't need it, our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they call it, these were no longer the right reasons" (153-154). Her feeling sick after killing the fish in chapter 7 has gradually turned into a sense of guilt, because she acknowledges and realizes she is involved in the process of destruction and commodification of nature.

In order to restore the balance for killing a fish, she frees the frogs that would have been used as baits and looking at them triggers a memory of when she used to attend high school and each student had to vivisect a frog. "Each desk with a tray on it and a frog, exhaling ether, spread and pinned flat as a doily and split open, the organs explored and clipped out, the detached heart still gulping slowly" (154). The frogs, together with the worms were sacrificed for scientific purposes, so that students could learn about animals' anatomy, without considering the pain inflicted to those helpless victims.

The narrator reflects that she also provoked the suffering and the death of those animals and this reinforces her feeling capable of harming other creatures, so she draws the conclusion she is not only a passive victim, but she is responsible for cruelty against nature. This recognition is the first step towards a rebirth and a sense of kinship between herself and the landscape. However, what frightens her is that “anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other: we practiced on them first” (154) and she fears that indifference towards nature will transform into indifference towards other individuals. Her fear is justified, since she and the others are unable to connect emotionally: for example when Joe asks her to marry him and she refuses or when David humiliates his wife and does not feel bad for it. This hints at the fact that cruelty towards animals is mirrored by cruelty towards women, who are in a victim position to men, like nature is in a victim position towards humans. We shall see the similarities between these two victim positions later in the chapter. However, as it is stated in *Survival*, Canadian nature is also powerful and it kills: in fact, the protagonist’s father is either believed to be bushed or to have died in the wilderness, because of the harshness of the Canadian climate and land.

For the Americans “senseless killing” is only “a game” and “the innocents get slaughtered because they exist [...] there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them, no conscience or piety; for them the only things worthy of life were human, their own kind of human” (163). When the protagonist encounters them a second time, she gets the impression that guilt for having killed the heron is glittering on them like tinfoil (155) and she recalls what she has heard in the past about what Americans used to do: they “stuffed the pontoons of their seaplane with illegal fish” and “they got drunk and chased loons in their powerboats for fun, backtracking on the loon as it dived, not

giving it a chance to fly, until it drowned or got chopped up in the propeller blades” (155).

At their third encounter she is so enraged she wishes she could “swing the paddle sideways, blade into” the head of one of them (164) and it is at this point that she unexpectedly discovers they are Canadians, but they are Americanized because they have been infected by the germ which made them turn into evil creatures, “they are evolving, they are halfway to machine, the leftover flesh atrophied and diseased, porous like an appendix” (239) and the reader can clearly perceive a sense of anxiety which derives from the protagonist’s fear of otherness and of being contaminated as well, since she is a Canadian and she still takes care of the land.

But they’d killed the heron anyway. It doesn’t matter what country they are from [...] they are still Americans, they are what’s in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can’t tell the difference [...] If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them.” (165)

At this point it is clear that the adjective “American” does not refer to a specific nationality, but it represents “a state of mind” (Rao 8) and it becomes a label for humans that kill for amusement and who embody cruelty against nature, it does not matter where they are from. The narrator is shocked to acknowledge the fact that the ones she believed to be Americans are in reality Canadians, because she thought Canadians were not capable of selling the land to foreign tourists and to American colonizers and because she believed them to be in a closer relationship with nature. Conversely, they

act like they have been infected by the virus the American brought into Canada, which is similar to the tree cancer which is killing the white birches on the border between Canada and the USA.

The character of David provides evidence of Canadians turning into Americans and acting like them. In fact, despite the fact that he hates Americans and their attitude and he is constantly swearing at them, "Bloody fascist pig Yanks" (6), he is defined as an "imposter, a pastiche" by the narrator and she also acknowledges that he is a "secondhand American" (195), "he didn't know what language to use, he'd forgotten his own, he had to copy". After the epiphany which occurs when she dives into the lake, she can see the virus "spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen. He was infested, garbled" (195). As a consequence, she reflects about the origin of evil.

But how did they evolve, where did the first one come from, they weren't an invasion from another planet, they were terrestrial. How did we get bad. For us when we were small the origin was Hitler, he was the great evil, many-tentacled, ancient and indestructible as the Devil [...] All possible horrors were measured against him. But Hitler was gone and the thing remained; whatever it was, even then, moving away from them as they smirked and waved goodbye, I was asking Are the Americans worse than Hitler. It was like cutting up a tapeworm, the pieces grew (165).

The fact that the aforementioned questions take the shape of affirmative sentences may suggest the narrator has been asking herself these questions for a long time and her head is crowded with this kind of interrogatives. Apparently, she has not been able to answer them up to this moment, when she comes to the conclusion that evil exists in

everyone and she remembers when, as a child, she used to destroy her “least favourite doll, ripped her cloth body open and pulled out the stuffing [...] then we threw her into the lake” (166) and throw leeches into the fire for fun with her brother. They did that when their mother “wasn’t watching, she prohibited cruelty” (169) and they had been taught that “killing was wrong [...] enemies and food” were the only exceptions (167). She also remembers she “didn’t mind that [cruelty] so much, if only they [the leeches] would die; but they would writhe out and crawl painfully, coated with ashes and pine needles, back towards the lake [...] then he [her brother] would pick them up with two sticks and put them back in the flames again” (167). She draws the conclusion that her brother and herself were not better than the Americans, they “just had different victims” and being “a barbarian, a vandal [...] was innate” (167).

Back into the present tense, she can notice that the heron’s corpse is still hanging from the same tree “desecrated, unredeemed” (167) and the sight creates the feeling of “a sickening complicity, sticky as glue” in the protagonist. The sense of guilt is so heavy she feels “as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it: one of the silent guarded faces in the crowd. The trouble some people have being German [...] I have being human” (167) and what disturbs her the most about this death is that it is “causeless, undiluted” (167). This meditation triggers another memory from her childhood, namely the discovery of her brother’s secret laboratory. Since he was not able to catch birds like herons,

What he caught was the slower things. He kept them in jars and tin cans on a board shelf back in the forest, near the swamp; to reach them he made a secret path, marked only by small notches on the trees, a code. Sometimes

he forgot to feed them or perhaps it was too cold at night, because when I went there by myself that day one of the snakes was dead and several of the frogs, their skin dry and their yellow stomachs puffed up, and the crayfish was floating in the clouded water with its legs uppermost like a spider's. I emptied those bottles into the swamp. The other things, the ones still alive, I let out. I rinsed the jars and tins and left them in a row on the board. (168)

The dead heron reminds the protagonist of all the small dead animals trapped into her brother's laboratory and which slowly died so that he could perform his senseless and cruel experiments. The first time, she was brave enough to rescue the animals which were still alive and she also cleaned the jars of the dead ones she had thrown away, as if she felt the need to purify them from the death of the previous creatures. However, she was so scared of her brother that she hid in the woods until dinner time and when she saw him he was furious. "Afterwards he trapped other things and changed the place; this time he wouldn't tell me. I found it anyway but I was afraid to let them out again. Because of my fear they were killed" (168).

This quotation explains the origin of her feeling guilty, which lies in her incapability to free the trapped animals a second time because she was afraid of her brother as a child, together with taking responsibility for the episodes of killing leeches and the vivisection of the frogs at high school. In other words, she recognizes she has "violated organic life by not having stopped the relentless killing" (Staels 58). Moreover, her aborted fetus is described as a creature in a jar suspended in the air when she woke up from anaesthesia, resembling the animals of her brother's laboratory. Not being able to oppose her former lover's will to abort the child in her adult life constitutes her heaviest

sin and she cannot help but feeling guilty, because she could oppose him but, out of fear, she did nothing and let the baby die. As a result, the death of her fetus is compared to the death of the heron, the fish, the frogs and the trapped creatures: all these deaths could have been avoided as they were senseless and cruel.

Deer skeleton we found on the island, shreds of flesh on it still [...] the wolves had killed it in the winter because it was old, that was natural. If we dived for them [the fish] and used our teeth to catch them, fighting on their own grounds, that would be fair, but hooks were substitutes and air wasn't their place. (161)

In other words, animals killing other animals for food is natural, but humans killing animals for sport with the help of technology is not acceptable and it is assimilated to a crime. Americans are the ones who act like this and the protagonist hates them to the point that she wishes they could vanish, so that they will not be able to disturb "anything else, that way there would be more room for the animals, they would be rescued" (197). In fact, in section three, when she is alone on the island, she has to look for food and she states "I can catch a bird or a fish, with my hands, that will be fair" (235), but she finally decides to eat fruit and vegetables.

The narrator's reflection which leads her to take responsibility for acts of cruelty against nature intensifies after she has dived into the lake, which mirrors her diving into the depths of her unconscious. In fact, it is thanks to nature that she can find the lost part of herself and begin a process of healing from her emotional death and immersing herself into the lake marks the beginning of the emerging of the animal part she had suffocated after undergoing an abortion.

From chapter 17 onwards, she increasingly isolates herself from the others and her attitude of closure towards them is symbolized by the image of her closed fist. A fist conveys aggressiveness, closure and it also prevents others from interpreting the protagonist's identity. In fact she states she is hiding "clues and solutions" inside her fist (95). She also starts feeling a stronger and stronger kinship with the environment and the animals, because Anna and David "are already turning to metal, skins galvanizing, heads congealing to brass knobs" (203). For Joe "truth might still be possible" (203) because he hardly speaks and he is always depicted with animal features. In fact, at the end of chapter 18, Anna exclaims "God, she really is inhuman" (197), but she prefers being part of the animal world, instead of belonging to the "American race", who causes pain and destruction. It is also at this point in the narrative that she starts seeing clearly that her parents, and especially her mother, were models to follow because they lived in contact with nature, but their role in the novel and for the protagonist will be examined in the following chapter.

After accepting the fact that she is both a victim and a victimizer, her process of rebirth is taken to a further step and she manages to have sexual intercourse with Joe, because she feels it is the right time for her to conceive. This child is conceived on the ground outside the cabin, under the moonlight, like animals do.

I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds. This time I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone; or on leaves, dry leaves, a heap of them,

that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words. (209).

Thanks to this possible second pregnancy, which the protagonist dreams so that she can restore the life of her aborted child, and which is characterized by healing powers, she is able to forgive herself and being forgiven by her child. Moreover, she has become whole again, she has accepted her animal part and the baby she is now carrying in her womb seems not to have any human features. In addition, she is not willing to teach him any language, since in her opinion, "language divides us into fragments" (187). However, her rebirth is not yet complete because section three will be marked by the protagonist's retreat into nature and, by abandoning human habits, she will be able to restore her emotional equilibrium.

As we have seen in this chapter, the exploitation and senseless destruction of nature, epitomized by the dead heron and the fish images, may be compared to the treatment of women in the novel. Apart from the protagonist, who has been forced to undergo an interruption of pregnancy, the woman victim par excellence in *Surfacing* is Anna. Anna has been married with David for nine years and during their marriage she has been victimized and humiliated because he does not consider her as his intellectual peer and he feels superior to her. Indeed, David tells the narrator "I'm all for the equality of women; she just doesn't happen to be equal and that's not my fault, is it?" (176). In fact, he always infantilize her in their relationship, he swears at her and he keeps on playing mean jokes to her: "Goose Anna in the bum and three days later she squeals. Cheer up,

you're so cute when you're mad" (143), or commenting on her body: "Anna you're eating too much" (125).

During her stay on the island, Anna prefers tanning and reading a detective novel instead of going fishing or other dynamic activities and she gets tired soon when she and the narrator pull weeds. Furthermore she does not wear appropriate clothes for the journey, since she wears a tunic and bellbottoms, and for staying on the island and she has to borrow the protagonist's mother leather jacket because she is cold (157).

Anna is constantly wearing makeup and the protagonist, who considers Anna her best friend, has never seen her without makeup, "her artificial face is the natural one" (51). Anna tries to look attractive to David because "he wants" her "to look like a young chick all the time" (156), demonstrating that physical beauty is put on the foreground, while they ignore their problem of lack of communication. Anna's wearing makeup and her panicking when she cannot wear it may suggest she connects her identity with makeup and she prefers taking care of her surface rather than her being. According to Jung, if a person identifies him/herself with his/her social role s/he will end being confused about his/her identity beyond his/her social role, with a subsequent psychological fragility and this description seem suitable to describe Anna's psychology. In fact, she is playing the role of a wife and she is conforming to the model of attractive femininity advertised in fashion magazines.

According to Cristina Giorcelli, clothing and makeup may undermine the essence of a person and this is probably what happened to Anna, since she wears makeup as a mask, in fact the narrator refers to her makeup as "a visor" which Anna slaps "down over her face like a visor" (211), to adapt to a certain model of femininity. This may also hint at

the fact that when Anna is wearing makeup, she conveys her will to metamorphose herself into an attractive woman, like the ones on the fashion magazines she reads: she is struggling to conform, imitate and wear the shoes of that precise model of femininity. Her makeup and her clothes constitute Anna's surface, which she created as a means of communication between the outer world and herself. However, her being worried with makeup may hint at the fact that under her flawless surface there is an emptiness, because she conformed to a fake model of femininity and she annihilated her personality in order to please her husband and be attractive to him. In fact, when she forgets her makeup, she starts panicking because she fears her husband's reaction and this clearly hints at the objectification of women, which Atwood is willing to criticize. David, on the other hand, also combs his hair "to cover the patches where it had once grown" (118) to look younger than he is.

Their lack of communication seems a paradox, since David is a Communication teacher and holds classes for adults. However, he is an oppressive and violent husband and Anna tells the protagonist "he's got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I'm never sure. He's crazy, there's something missing in him [...] He likes to make me cry because he can't do it himself" (156). Anna is always under pressure because she has to please him and she tells the narrator that she constantly feels his eyes on her and at the least mistake he would avoid making love with her or he would treat her like his sexual object for punishment. David also sleeps with other women while being married to Anna and then he tells her about his sexual intercourses to make her jealous and "to show" her "he can do it and get away with it" (126) and she feels powerless because she cannot stop him. Anna also adds that

David's flirting with the narrator is not because he is attracted by her, on the contrary he acts like that only to provoke Anna.

Moreover, David insists that Anna resumes taking the birth control pill, even though it had caused her problems, namely "a blood clot" (100) in her leg, but he seems not to be worried and "he says it's no worse for you than an aspirin, but next time it could be the heart or something" (100). Despite this, Anna seems to love him and she thinks he behaves like that with her because he cannot stand her loving him (157).

The most humiliating scene for Anna occurs when she is forced to be filmed naked for David's documentary, *Random Samples*, and she is forced to undress in front of the others. On the other hand, Joe is not willing to film her, if she does not agree, but David claims she is pretending she does not want to be filmed. At the beginning Anna tries to resist, but David ignores her attempts and leaves her no choice. "Now just take it (the bikini) off like a good girl or I'll have to take it off for you" (173). He is speaking to her as if she was a child and it is clear he can make her do whatever he wishes because she considers her to be his property and he can dispose of her as he likes. After being filmed without her consent, Anna jumps into the lake and the narrator, who witnessed the episode at a distance, observes that "her pink face was dissolving, her skin was covered with sand and pine needles like a burned leech" (174), and her role of victim is reinforced by this comparison with a leech, which the narrator used to burn as a child.

At dinner time, on the day David attempted to seduce the protagonist, he lets Anna believe he has succeeded in seducing her and the narrator immediately tells her she refused David's offer. Anna's answer seems to convey she appreciated the fact she did not sleep with her husband, but the narrator has the impression she is resentful because

she did not give in. In fact, Anna and David's relationship is a battle they fight to achieve power in their marriage and the narrator can notice that

Anna was more than sad, she was desperate, her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he was her life, her life was the fight. she was fighting him because if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere. To continue the war. (196).

Despite the fact that their struggle for power in their relationship is extremely tiresome, Anna refuses the narrator's advice to divorce and the narrator progressively stops feeling sorry for her, because she has the chance to change her life and refuse to be a victim. Instead, Anna keeps on staying with her abusive husband and on the last day on the island "she has her purple tunic on and her white bellbottoms, urban costume, and her makeup is slabbed down over her face like a visor" (211). She is looking forward to going back to the city and the narrator reflects while observing her checking her makeup, since it is the only way to keep her marriage alive.

'Is my nose peeling?' she says, rubbing it. From her handbag she takes a round gilt compact with violets on the cover. She opens it, unclosing her other self, and runs her fingertips around the corners of her mouth [...] then she unswivels a pink stick and dots her cheeks and blends them, changing her shape, performing the only magic left to her [...] A seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone's

head. She is locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth,
nothing goes in, nothing comes out. (213-214)

Anna is trying to imitate the ideal of femininity advertised in fashion magazines, but the narrator is aware of the fact that this is a false model to follow and it creates emptiness in women and it contributes to perpetrate the values of a patriarchal society in which women are relegated to domesticity, controlled and oppressed by men. As we saw in the previous chapter, creating fashionable surfaces for women to identify with and shape their identities accordingly is exactly Kat's job. Both in *Surfacing* and "Hairball", Atwood opposes false models of femininity because they are imitations of a model which does not exist and to which women try to conform, since this kind of femininity is advertised in magazines. Furthermore, the passive role of women in relationships with men is mirrored by the role of nature, which is dominated by men as well. In fact, they tame wild nature with technology and they restrain women with patriarchy.

A deep reflection about the oppression of women and nature and the role of men in the domination and oppression of women has given rise to Eco-feminism or ecological feminism. The term first appeared in 1974 and it designates "a philosophy and a movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the" one which allows the abuse of nature (Gautam, Sinha 1). Indeed, the fact that the narrator of *Surfacing* remains unnamed may suggest that she lacks a fixed identity and her experience may be assimilated to the experience of many other women throughout the world, who may well identify with her. The title itself conveys the idea

of self-exploration, a process which takes place when the protagonist is in the middle of nature.

Moreover, Eco-feminism fights the binary opposition between masculine and feminine, which is one of the tenets of patriarchal society. “On the one hand, the feminine principle represents Mother Nature, the body, irrationality, emotion and mysticism. On the other hand, the masculine principle represents rationality, logic, separation from nature, the head, intellectualism, language” (Gautam, Sinha 2). The protagonist makes sense of this division with the image of the head and the body being separated by the neck and she states that none of them can live without the other (95), instead they must work together.

The unnamed narrator grew up in a masculine world dominated by male figures: her father, her brother, her art professor, Joe. All of these male figures controlled her and told her how to behave and what they expected her to do. By obeying their will and surrendering, she ended up distorting and losing her identity in order to please her partner and she ends up amputated by the end of her relationship and the unnatural act of aborting her child.

Marriage is one expedient of the patriarchal society to restrain women and relegate them to the role of mothers. In fact, *Surfacing* presents examples of marriage which did not work: Anna and David's, her fake marriage to her lover and her professor's marriage to his wife, who has been betrayed. This is why she refuses Joe's marriage proposal and she tells him she has “been married before and it didn't work out” (110-111). Moreover, she is not even sure she loves him because she is emotionally numb, in fact she has been feeding “him unlimited supplies of nothing” (106). In addition, she

considers marriage “like jumping off a cliff [...] in the air, going down, waiting for the smash at the bottom” (57) and this suggests women are not in control of their lives after marriage.

Men also managed to control “the process of childbirth which nature assigned only to women” (Gautam, Sinha 2) and they seem not to be worried about the drawbacks child control may cause to women. In this way, they limit their creative power because “a woman has no right to have a baby without a husband” (Gautam, Sinha 2) and they reduce women to “a chemical slot-machine” (100), thanks to the contraceptive pill, which is contained in moon shaped packages “so that the woman can pretend she’s still natural, cyclical” (100). The narrator also reflects about the fact that the pill will be no longer needed when men will invent “the artificial womb” (100). However, the narrator thinks she managed to conceive a second child and she expresses her will to deliver it in the midst of nature. In fact, she claims “nobody must find out or they will do that to me again, strap me to the death machine, emptiness machine, legs in the metal framework, secret knives. This time I won’t let them” (210).

Another example of the restrictions women have to face is the protagonist’s work. Also her being creative in art is limited, in fact she works as a commercial artist, precisely as an illustrator. Although she was dreaming of becoming a real artist, she was told by her art professor that “there had never been any important woman artists”, so she studied design and she obtained a job in which she does “posters, covers, a little advertising and magazine work and the occasional commissioned book” (62–63). However, she is not satisfied with her job, which she defines as “the career I suddenly found myself having” (62) and she still does not feel at ease because she did not fulfill her desire and she

always has to compromise in order to sell and keep her job. In fact, she is stuck in an artistic block during the first days of her stay on the island because she cannot express herself through her art. Once again, she had the power to choose and study what she really liked but she accepted her lover's advice and she ended up being told what to paint by her boss.

Towards the end of the protagonist's inner journey, she admits that her crisis of identity was caused by the institutions of the patriarchal society and conceiving a child without being married allows her to rebel against patriarchy and affirms her creative power. However, she acknowledges that she and women more generally play an important role in subjugating and limiting themselves. She reflects that she had the power to free her brother's animals but she was afraid, she also had the power to refuse to abort her child, but she did nothing to impede it and Anna has the power to divorce, but she continues being married to an oppressive husband.

Atwood plays a relevant role as a spokesperson of feminism since the seventies, in which feminism, environmentalism and the role of women in society became relevant issues, and she conveys her concern on these issues in her works. By denouncing the inequality between men and women and questioning male superiority, she asserts that "women can refuse victimization" (Gautam, Sinha 3) and can free themselves from the institutions of patriarchal society. In fact, in the last chapter of *Surfacing*, the unnamed narrator states "this above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone" (249). This quote demonstrates her struggle to

become “a creative non-victim” (Survival 38), her taking responsibility for her actions and her refusal to fail in life.

Chapter Four – Spirituality: A Way Out?

The previous chapter examined the role of nature in *Surfacing* and it focused on its relevance in the protagonist's process of healing and restoring her wholeness. This last chapter will analyse the spiritual and religious elements present in the novel. In fact, the close reading of the first chapter highlighted a few references to the Christian religion and, thanks to the analysis of some of the relevant themes emerged from the close reading, it appeared that shamanism plays an important role for the narrator's re-appropriation of her identity. Moreover, allusions to the myth of the search for the Holy Grail are made by Atwood and the figures of the protagonist's parents will be discussed in terms of what they represent for her. Towards the end of the second section and the beginning of the third section, the narrator is searching the gifts her parents left to her as a legacy. By recuperating her repressed past and accepting her responsibility for her failure in life, she is ready to receive her parents' teachings and become whole again, restoring the divide between head and body, rational and emotional elements, the animal and the human component of herself and overcoming all the dual oppositions her father and her brother used to divide the world into. In fact, for her brother "there had to be a good kind and a bad kind of everything" (43), as her father taught him how to classify reality.

The protagonist's world seems to be "devoid of a belief in God", in fact "she has never been a believer, although [...] Catholicism permeates her milieu outside the family" (Rao 24). The first reference to the Christian religion we can read in *Surfacing* occurs when the narrator is watching out of the car's windows while she is on the new road, leading to her childhood place. Among the advertisement signs she can detect a crucifix and she

thinks of Christ as “the alien god, mysterious to” her (12). As we have already pointed out, the fact that she associates Christ to the unknown may suggest that, as a child, she was not taught by her parents the principles of the Christian religion. In fact, she lived with her family on a remote island where her family and her were the only human inhabitants and her parents were her only models. In fact, given the fact that her father was an atheist who strongly believed in the Enlightenment values such as reason, logic and rationality, since “he admired what he called the eighteenth century rationalists” (44), she was first initiated to Christianity by her brother and her classmates during elementary school. As a matter of fact, she remembers:

I learned about religion the way most children then learned about sex, not in the gutter but in the gravel and cement schoolyard, during the winter months of real school. They would cluster in groups, holding each others’ mittened hands and whispering. They terrified me by telling me there was a dead man in the sky watching everything I did. (53)

However, her brother was older than her, so he went to school before the narrator and he was curious about Christianity as she was. Thanks to the knowledge he acquired from his classmates, he told his sister that Christians went to the mass and “what they did inside was eat” (66), but since their parents would not allow them to sneak up and spy through the windows of the church, they could not see with their eyes what was happening during the mass. The fact that their parents prohibited them to watch the rituals from outside the church “made it illicit and attractive” to them (66) and the protagonist imagined the mass as a kind of birthday party, being this her “only experience then of people eating in groups” (66).

When I started school myself I begged to be allowed to go to Sunday School, like everyone else; I wanted to find out, also I wanted to be less conspicuous. My father didn't approve, he reacted as though I'd asked to go to a pool hall. Christianity was something he'd escaped from, he wished to protect us from its distortions. But after a couple of years he decided I was old enough, I could see for myself, reason would defend me. (66)

Her approach to Christianity occurred out of curiosity and her need to belong and she started going to Sunday School with one of her classmates and her family, who took a "missionary interest" (66) in her conversion. The first time she attended catechism she found out that the class was similar to an ordinary school class, but she did not learn much because the teacher told the students "about her admirers and their cars. At the end she handed out pictures of Jesus" (66) and the narrator was surprised to notice that he "didn't have thorns and ribs but was alive and draped in a bed sheet, tired-looking, surely incapable of miracles" (66-67). We may draw the conclusion that her naïve curiosity about Jesus and the Christian religion ended soon and she was disappointed since the Sunday School teacher did not seem to be interested in teaching catechism to the girls and Christ did not appear to her as omnipotent.

After Sunday School, her friend's family would invite her for lunch "which was always the same thing, pork and beans and canned pineapple for dessert" (67). Before eating, "the father would say Grace, 'For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful, Amen,' while the children pinched and kicked each other under the table" (67) and her classmate's mother would ask her what she had learned about God. Since she was not satisfied with the United Church, she considered becoming a

Catholic and she only confided it to her brother, because she feared her parents' reactions. "Catholics are crazy" (68) stated her brother, "they believe if you don't go to Mass you'll turn into a wolf" (68) and then he added that they had never gone to any Catholic functions and they did not turn into wolves, implying that there was no need to worry about it.

During her attendance of the Sunday School, she started praying. For example, she used to pray when she went fishing with her father and her brother: "Our father who art in heaven – Please let the fish be caught" (78) and sometimes it worked. However, when one of her classmates from the Sunday School told her "she had prayed for a Barbara Ann Scott doll [...] and she got it for her birthday" (89), the narrator "decided to pray too, not like the Lord's Prayer or the fish prayer but for something real" (89). She prayed to become invisible, but "in the morning everyone could still see" her and she got the impression she "had the wrong God" (89). As a consequence, since she felt ignored by God, she "didn't last long at Sunday School" (89) and this proves her "lack of religious feeling" (Rao 24).

However, her knowledge of the Christian religion is enough to let her associate the dead heron with Christ, because she states that "anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ; if they didn't kill birds and fish they would have killed us. The animals die that we may live, they are substitute people, hunters in the fall killing the deer, that is Christ also" (179). As we observed in the previous chapter, humans are indifferent towards nature and they do not realize the pain they are inflicting to animals and plants and this reflection leads the protagonist to acknowledge her own sin against nature and to accept her sense of guilt. Conversely, for the Americans and David "the heron is only

a trophy to suspend from a tree by a blue nylon rope or to capture inside a camera” (Guédon 102).

Moreover, the sacrifice of the heron is compared to the sacrifice of Christ, who died to save us. Similarly, the innocent heron died so that other humans may survive, as the protagonist states (that “animals are substitutes for people” and they “die that we may live” (179)) and the narrator acknowledges the sacrality of all life forms. In fact, “through the heron” she “sees all of the other animals which modern human beings must not only kill as in the past, but now needlessly destroy” (Guédon 102). In fact, the killing of creatures such as fish, birds, plants, frogs, worms and her baby are equally cruel actions that could be avoided.

She also states that “it would have been different in those countries where an animal is the soul of an ancestor or the child of a god, at least they (the Americanized Canadians who killed the heron) would have felt guilt” (164). The acknowledgment of her taking part to senseless destruction of nature also demonstrates that “the return to childhood is not the way to redemption” (Guédon 102), since she believed she was innocent and in a closer relationship to nature when she was a child. On the contrary, she has to rebalance the desecration performed by the Americans and distance from it. This is the first step towards her rebirth and it also marks the beginning of her “hidden metamorphosis” (Guédon 102), which will allow her to access the world of the gods of nature and the power.

The reference to the countries in which animals are sacred, together with the reference to the gods of nature, introduces the theme of shamanism. In fact, the fascinating shamanic tone which characterizes the final part of the novel has the

function of shaping and attributing meaning to the quest at the heart of *Surfacing* and it is conveyed in a subtle way through “pictures, animals, gestures, and scenes used as recurrent symbols” (Guédon 91). In fact, the Indian pictographs her father was replicating on paper are the reason why the narrator decides to immerse herself into the water of the lake. When she first looks at “his lunatic drawings” (128), she considers the fact that her father “might not be dead” (128), but instead he could have gone mad, since she thinks “he’d always been logical, and madness is only an amplification of what you already are” (128).

First the hands and antlered figures, always with numbers scrawled in the corner, [...] a half-moon with four sticks coming out of it, bulbed at the ends. I righted the page, judging by the numbers, and it became a boat with people, the knobs were their heads. It was reassuring to find I could interpret it, it made sense.

But the next one was nothing I could recognize. The body was long, a snake or a fish; it had four limbs or arms and a tail and on the head were two branched horns. Lengthwise it was like an animal, an alligator; upright it was more human, but only in positions of the arms and the front-facing eyes. (129)

The drawings confuse the narrator who thinks her father had hallucinations due to the fact he was living alone in the wilderness after the death of his wife. She also thinks the drawings may represent himself, “what he thought he was turning into” (129). Then, a letter addressed to her father explaining he was working for a university research project and clarifying that he had taken pictures and provided maps to them makes the

narrator's hypothesis about her father's madness crumble: "this was the solution, the explanation. he never failed to explain" (131).

Furthermore, she finds a paragraph concerning the doubts about the origins and the meaning of Indian rock paintings suggesting he was replicating the figures he had found on rocks. As a result, "his drawings were not originals [...] only copies" (131) and the narrator assumes he may have taken up this hobby to keep busy and "if he'd become hooked on these rock paintings he would have combed the area for them, collecting them with his camera, pestering the experts by letter whenever he found one; an old man's delusion of usefulness" (131). For the narrator, this is a revelation: "I had the proof now, indisputable, of sanity and therefore of death" (131). However, because of her emotional numbness she is unable to feel sorrow, instead she feels "a blank, a disappointment" because "crazy people can come back, from wherever they go to take refuge, but dead people can't, they are prohibited" (131).

In this moment she realizes her father is dead and therefore she will not be able to see him anymore, but when she tries to imagine his face, she cannot because she has removed that content from her mind. She can remember, instead, "the cards he used to hold up" to test her and her brother in mathematics and she realizes "he is as absent now as a number, a zero, a question mark in place of the missing answer" (131-132) and she will have to cope with his absence, emotionally speaking. Once again she is waiting for pain to hit her but nothing happens, so she concentrates on the drawings:

There was a gap, something not accounted for, something left over. [...]

The notes and numbers were apparently a location code, it was like a puzzle he'd left for me to solve, an arithmetic problem [...] The numbers

were a system, a game; I would play it with him, it would make him seem less dead. (132)

By studying his drawings she recognizes the name of a place, that is “White Birch Lake” and she discovers that her father had already marked a map with the numbers he had written on each drawing and finally she is able to decipher the clues. Consequently, she organizes a trip to the lake, in whose depths she is confronted with the corpse of her father. This is a moment of epiphany which also marks the beginning of her dive into madness and the first step towards her metamorphosis. When she reemerges from water, she can feel the power in her and she increasingly becomes silent. She can feel the other half of herself “that had begun to return” (189).

The drawings of antlered figures and the maps her father was studying constitute the legacy left for the narrator by him, his gift for his daughter.

The map crosses and the drawings made sense now: at the beginning he must have been only locating the rock paintings, deducing them, tracing and photographing them, a retirement hobby; but then he found out about them. The Indians did not own salvation but they had once known where it lived and their signs marked the sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth [...] He had discovered new places, new oracles, they were things he was seeing the way I has seen, true visions; at the end, after the failure of logic. (186)

The map indicates the sacred places where she can find the power of the spirits of nature and gain access to the non-human world, which allows the protagonist to know the truth. The White Birch Lake proves to be one of them and after the epiphany, the

narrator feels compelled to “leave something” because “that was what you were supposed to do, leave a piece of your clothing as an offering” to the spirits. She realizes that “these gods [...] unacknowledged or forgotten” are “the only ones who had ever given” her what she needed (186) and, although she does not know their names, she can feel the power flowing into her. It is also thanks to this gift that she can perceive feeling coming back into her and she gets the impression she tingles “like a foot that’s been asleep” (187).

The narrator distances even more from the other characters, in fact, she stops Joe’s lovemaking attempt in the canoe on the surface of the lake because she acknowledges the sacredness of the place and she perceives his intrusion into her body as a “sacrilege”, since he is “one of the killers” (188). She also realizes she is closer to the animal world than to the human world and a feeling of hatred towards Americans grows inside her because “they had turned against the gods” (197) and she wishes there is “a machine that could make them vanish [...] without disturbing anything else, that way there would be more room for the animals, they would be rescued” (197).

Thanks to the power of the gods, she starts to see the truth about her own affair and about what the other characters are turning into, especially David. In fact, when he tries to seduce her, she attempts to distance him because he is interfering with the power she has gained access to, being him a perpetrator of the American false values. Thanks to the power, which she can perceive as flowing into her eyes, she can “see into him” and she realizes “he was an imposter [...] a second-hand American” (195). However, the gift she has received from her father is not enough and she also needs her mother’s legacy. In fact she states “more than ever I needed to find it, the thing she had hidden; the power

from my father's intercession wasn't enough to protect me, it gave only knowledge and there were more gods than his, his were the gods of the head, antlers rooted in the brain" (195).

When she sees the Americans approaching the "cliff where the gods lived" on a powerboat, she reflects they will not be able to receive the power, "they wouldn't be allowed" (190) because they belong to the human race of the happy killers and, conversely, "it was dangerous for them to go there without knowing about the power; they might hurt themselves" (190-191). She has been able to endure only thanks to the "talisman" left to her by her father, his "guides, the man-animals and the maze of numbers" (191).

The "man-animals" and the antlered creatures depicted by her father are Indian pictographs, whose origin resists any clear attributions to a certain culture or location and we still are not able to date them precisely. They usually appear on rocks or cliffs and they deal with religion and supernatural powers of the Indian tribes who inhabited Canada. In *Surfacing* they have the function of tracing the steps of the protagonist's dehumanization and metamorphosis, becoming "living sings of sacred power" (Guédon 93). Each of them has a precise meaning since pictographs also had a communicative function but they are also connected to "shamanic practices and to dreams" (Guédon 94).

The figure portrayed in her father's drawings is "May-may-gway-shi, the rock spirit, or in Dewdney's terms [...] Mis-shi-pi-zhiw or Misshipeshu, the Great Lynx, also known as Water Panther, Snake Monster, Underwater Cat, or the Lion" (Guédon 94). This devilish spirit is believed to live in cracks or caves near the water, it is represented

as a small creature with a big horned head and a long tail and sometimes it is depicted as a snake with horns. Atwood chose this supernatural creature associated with death and smart malignity in order to “project her heroine’s fears and hope” (Guédon 95) and it becomes a guide for the narrator in her quest for her father and for her deeper self to the extent that she is able to retrieve her lost memory and bring back to life the dead part of herself. It is also in this moment that she recognizes that the pictographs “are not things; they are the signs and doorways to salvation, to true vision” (Guédon 96). In fact, the “dark oval trailing limbs” (182) may be interpreted as an apparition of the horned god, who answered her call for help and which she associates both to her aborted child and her dead father.

The second apparition of the natural spirit occurs when she conceives her second child with Joe and the god appears transformed: the embryo is described as “a god with shining fur, at once human and animal” (Guédon 96). The third apparition of the god occurs when the narrator is immersed in the wilderness of the island, alone, and she watches it, now under the shape of a fish with horns:

From the lake a fish jumps – An idea of a fish jumps – A fish jumps, carved wooden fish with dots painted on the sides, no, antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliffstone, protecting spirit. It hangs in the air suspended, flesh turned to icon, he has changed again, returned to the water. How many shapes can he take. – I watch it for an hour or so; then it drops and softens, the circles widen, it becomes an ordinary fish again. (243)

Evidence of the god’s ability to change shape is also provided in the drawings collected into a scrapbook which the narrator drew as a child. She depicted it “in its

Christian form" (Guédon 97) when her brother and she "learned in the winter about the Devil and God: if the Devil was allowed a tail and horns, God needed them also, they were advantages" (202). This drawing constitutes her mother's gift for her and she is able to comprehend it only because she is keeping away from the other characters. In fact, after discovering her father's legacy and deciphering the drawings and the maps, she is certain that her mother left a gift for her as well: "It would be right for my mother to have left something for me also, a legacy" (191).

However, her mother was a much more enigmatic figure than her father as she was very distant from his strong rationalism. The narrator reflects that her father's gift was "complicated, tangled, but hers would be simple as a hand" (191). She decides to look inside the cabin and she senses the power as soon as she approaches her room. When she opens a scrapbook containing drawings from her childhood she is sure one of the drawings will tell her something.

The gift itself was a loose page, the edge torn, the figures drawn in crayon. On the left was a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out. Opposite her was a man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail. The picture was mine, I had made it. The baby was myself before I was born, the man was God. (202)

She believes that her mother preserved that precise drawing for her and now she is able to understand its "meaning with the help of the power" (202), namely the drawing represents the "Great Goddess of fecundity" (Staels 61) and this leads her to reaffirm the life of her aborted child. Now that she has received both her parents' gifts, she is able to see the gods in "their true shape" because she perceives she is no longer human and

“after the transformation they could be reached” (202–203). As a result, she is in a close relationship to nature thanks to her parents’ teachings and the power of the gods of nature suggests that she has to reassert the life she destroyed in the past to restore the balance.

Thus, the protagonist manages to have sexual intercourse with Joe in the midst of nature as a way to renew “the life of her lost child” (Guédon 100). This scene marks the climax of her journey, but it represents only a further step in her process of healing, which will be examined later in the chapter. The “newly conceived infant” (Guédon 97) appears both as an animal and a god and thus it is sacred and the narrator can feel it sending out filaments in her, “plant–animal” she ferries “it secure between death and life” (217). In the Indian tradition the embryo is believed to be “still in contact with the non–human world of animals, spirits, and other powers” (Guédon 97) and it is for this reason that it may still be called back to the world of spirits. In fact, pregnant women have to respect a set of rules in order to protect the unborn baby from the call of the non–human world and in order not to lose it.

The final part of the narrator’s descent into the non–human world and into a state of controlled insanity, following shamanic rituals of purification such as fasting, takes part in the third and last section of *Surfacing* and it is clear she has subconsciously chosen “her parents as guides in her journey of rebirth” (Rao, 24). Indeed, she is hiding in the wilderness when Evans arrives on a boat to take them back to the city because she has just destroyed Random Samples by dumping the reels into the water of the lake and David is furious. Although her companions are screaming her name and seem not to be willing to leave the island without her, she reflects “it’s too late, I no longer have a name.

I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending" (218) and the boat departs. This quote highlights the opposition between civilization, characterized by technology patriarchy and social conventions, and the state of nature, spirituality and the non-human world.

By denying her name she asserts her belonging to nature instead of civilization and she recognizes all the other characters as Americans, "they are all Americans now" (219). At this point she is alone on the island and she ponders "I am by myself; this is what I wanted, to stay here alone. From any rational point of view I am absurd; but there are no longer any rational points of view" (219), since she is rejecting everything that belongs to the human world such as language, which has previously been regarded as problematic, since it causes division, "it divides us into fragments" (187). In fact, after the power entered her, she had "to concentrate in order to talk to" David, since "the English words seemed imported, foreign; it was like trying to listen to two separate conversations, each interrupting the other" (192).

Language appeared to her as meaningless in the first chapter and she wished she could be "deaf and dumb" (9) because words can lie and, consequently, misrepresent reality. Also laughter can be faked because it is "canned" by Americans as one of their consumer products. On the other hand, animals do not use any language and therefore they cannot lie. As a result the alternative to language is silence. In fact, "all the contacts with the powers and 'spirits' are conveyed through images and feeling, never through words" (Guédon 107) and her reemerging from the lake marks the beginning of a dissolution of language, in fact "names of things" starts "fading but their forms and uses remaining, the animals learned what to eat without nouns" (191).

The reason why she decides to stay on the island is to find out the truth about herself and go deep into the origin of her sorrow and her repressed past. In fact, recovery is necessary for her to achieve a fully integrated self. In this last section she will have visions of both her parents, she will be given by them the power to see and she will come to terms with the pain their deaths caused to her, which she denied up to this moment. First, she goes back to the house and unpacks her clothes to keep busy and she feels that “the power has drained away” her “fingers are empty as gloves, eyes ordinary, nothing guides” her (222) and she does not know what to do. She falls asleep on the sofa and when she wakes up it is darkening. When she decides to pull vegetables out of the ground and have them for dinner she suddenly starts crying because pain and nostalgia hit her.

I’m crying finally, it’s the first time, I watch myself doing it: [...] my breath knots, my body tightens against it; the water fills my mouth, fish taste. But I’m not mourning, I’m accusing them, *Why did you?* They chose it, they had control over their death, they decided it was time to leave and they left, they set up this barrier. They didn’t consider how I would feel, who would take care of me. I’m furious because they let it happen.

‘Here I am,’ I call. ‘I’m here!’ Voice rising with the frustration and then the terror of hearing no answer, the time we were playing after supper and I hid too well, too far away and they couldn’t find me [...] ‘I’m here!’ But nothing happens. (223)

The protagonist feels betrayed by the loss of her parents and now that she is alone on the island she can experience their absence without the interference of her friends and

lover. She has been silencing the pain and disguising the memories concerning her parents, dealing with her family as if they were somebody else's family, because accepting their absence was too painful for her to face. Her parents have been her first models and as a child she believed they were god-like creatures. In fact, she remembers her father denied the existence of God and she reflects "if you tell your children God doesn't exist they will be forced to believe you are the god, but what happens when they find out you are human after all, you have to grow old and die?" (132) and this precisely what happens to the narrator. At Sunday School they taught her about Resurrection and she thought it was "like plants" but her father "reasonably pointed out" that "people are not onions [...] they stay under" (132).

She still identifies her parents as "spiritual deities" and up to this moment she believed they had total control over their lives and deaths. In fact, she is convinced that "if her father died he must have had clear motives, for in her mind he used to always have total control over the laws of (human) nature" (Staels 42) and her mother left her disappointed "because she showed lack of control over the process of life and death" (Staels 42). She also believes they consciously decided to abandon her and she is sure they were aware of the fact they would have hurt her.

Indeed, as a child, she was certain her parents were infallible. Her father was a botanist and entomologist who strongly believed in the Enlightenment values. He was an hermit of some sorts and he decided to settle on a remote island in the middle of a lake in the Canadian bush "to recreate the context of the original British settlers" (Staels 38). He worked for the paper company of the close village and for the government as well. He was guided by reason, and it is due to his faith in logic that he refused the masses

“guided by passion” and he “escaped from Christianity” which, in his opinion, does not provide “final explanations” (Staels 38). He believed in “a ‘benevolent’ coherent order in nature” (Staels 38) and he spent his life studying and classifying natural elements. He relied on analytical reasoning of the visible and he denied the invisible and the narrator admired him as “her solid all-knowing god, a guide who is capable of directing others towards final meaning” (Staels 38). Taking into consideration the head-body division, her father represented the head, characterized by rationalism and a will to extend his “control over reality through rationalist mental operations” and he also was the “‘head’ of the family” (Staels 40). However, in the end, he acknowledged that logic could fail and the invisible world of the spirits could guide him to a closer relationship to nature. In fact, “he had discovered new places, new oracles, they were things he was seeing the way I had seen, true vision; at the end, after the failure of logic” and this must have terrified him, given the fact that he always wanted to explain the world through logic (186).

As far as her mother is concerned, she represents the body and she is a mysterious figure even for her daughter, who realizes she does not know how she spent her days: she used to feed the jays or pull weeds, “but on some days she would simply vanish, walk off by herself into the forest” (62). Atwood seems to allude to the fact that she died of brain’s cancer and this reinforces her being “a woman of heart” (Thomas 82) and her opposition to reason and logic. The protagonist remembers her “as someone who used to cross spatio-temporal boundaries” (Staels, 56), in fact “it was impossible to be like my mother, it would need a time warp; she was either ten thousand years behind the rest or fifty years ahead of them” (62). She is a loving mother who provides “physical/emotional sustenance and warmth to family” (Thomas 82) and she is remembered to be always

present in the narrator's childhood. In fact, she used to give lifesavers to her daughter when she felt sick in the car (12-13), she kept her scrapbooks and pictures of her and despite the fact she was suffering, she took care of her family, "collecting the seasons and the weather and her children's faces" (247) and she was ready to sacrifice herself when they were in danger. She is also depicted as a life-giving figure associated with fertility and the narrator also attributes to her mother the power of giving life to the dead. In fact, she saved her brother from drowning, "she leaned over and reached down and grabbed him by the air, hauled him up and poured the water out of him", he was "raised from the dead" (91). She is remembered to be a silent figure who prefers saying she does not know, unlike the protagonist's father who had all the answers, and the narrator is sure she knew everything but she avoided to tell, demonstrating her will to escape from language.

Another central episode the narrator remembers about her mother is when she protected her brother and the protagonist from a bear, while her father was away. The child narrator saw it as "enormous" but her mother "stood up and walked towards it; it hesitated and grunted. She yelled a word at it that sounded like 'Scat!' and waved her arms, and it turned around and thudded into the forest" (99). The narrator was fascinated by her mother's power over the bear and she thinks

That was the picture I kept, my mother seen from the back, arms upraised as though she was flying, and the bear terrified. When she told the story later she said she'd been scared to death but I couldn't believe that, she had been so positive, assured, as if she knew a foolproof magic formula: gesture and word. She was wearing her leather jacket" (99).

The power returns when she is outside the house and the gate is open and it allows her to sense her parents' presence. She is convinced that she "can bring them back. They're here now" she "can sense them waiting, beyond sight on the path or in the long grass outside the fence, they are pulling against" her, but she "can make them come out, from wherever it is they are hiding" (223). She realizes that spirits cannot enter enclosed spaces such as the fence or the house and she refuges inside the cabin because the power is gone again. "The house will defend" her (224) from something she is not able to control, but inside she is confronted again with a symbol of loss, namely her mother's leather jacket and she connects its smell to the smell of loss, "irrecoverable" (225).

At night she is woken up by fear which "arrives like waves, like footfalls, it has no center" and "encloses" her "like an armour", her "skin is afraid, rigid" (225). This fear is the power of the gods which is returning under another form and she is sensing

they want to get in, they want me to open the windows, the door, they can't do it by themselves. I'm the only one, they are depending on me but I don't know any longer who they are; however they come back they won't be the same, they will have changed. I willed it, I called to them, that they should arrive is logical; but logic is a wall, I built it, on the other side is terror.
(226)

Fear guides her and she perceives her parents' spirits are attempting to reach her but they cannot enter enclosed spaces. However, she is afraid of their change, of what they have become, and she recognizes she has been relying on logic, like her father did, she has tried to explain everything through reason to keep fear away. Now she has to accept

it and embrace it in order to be guided and restore her wholeness. In the morning she understands that “there must be rules. places I’m permitted to be, other places I’m not. I’ll have to listen carefully, if I trust them they will tell me what is allowed” (228). Thanks to the return of the power, she knows “the brush is forbidden” and the mirror as well. This is why she looks at her reflection one last time and then she turns it towards the wall. She no longer wishes to be seen and trapped into the mirror, but to see.

Thanks to the power, the protagonist is approaching a dimension in which supernatural elements are integrated with nature and, in order to access the truth, she has to “accept her transformation” and “an altered state of consciousness” (Guédon, 104). At this point, she is on the verge of rejecting her old identity and discovering her new one. She dissolves her old human identity by immersing into a timeless and speechless dimension. She recognizes “it is time that separates us, I was a coward, I would not let them into my age, my place. Now I must enter theirs” (229). In fact, she burns her illustrations, her brushes and paint tubes, refusing to be an illustrator any longer; she drops her fake wedding ring into the fire and she burns the scrapbooks, the books, the pictures and the maps as well. Then she destroys all the objects that can be damaged and “everything I can’t break [...] I throw on the floor” (230). She ruins all the clothes and blankets with a knife and she does not even spare her mother’s leather jacket. Finally she immerses into the lake in a baptism of some sorts and she re-emerges as a new creature.

She leaves her clothes in the lake and she carries with her a blanket “until the fur grows” (230). Since she is not allowed to go back to the house and she has accepted her new animal state, she feeds herself with fruit and vegetables and she sleeps on a heap of

leaves, covered with the blanket. She can feel her baby growing into her since now she is in connection with her body and she pictures it as “the fur god with tail and horns” (235) and the communion with nature is complete when she leans against a tree and she feels

I am a tree leaning

I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground

I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals
move and grow, I am a place (236)

Suddenly she hears the jays screaming and she has a vision of her mother as she appeared when she was young, before the illness killed her. She sees her feeding the jays, as she used to do.

Then I see her. She is standing in front of the cabin, her hands stretched out, she is wearing her grey leather jacket; her hair is long, down to her shoulders in the style of thirty years ago, before I was born; she is turned half away from me, I can see only the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding them: one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder.
(236)

The protagonist is surprised to see her and she fears she is not real, only a fabrication, like the “paper house” she constructed to disguise her abortion, she fears her mother is a “paper doll” (237). However, the narrator gets the impression she has sensed her presence because “she turns her head quietly and looks at me, past me, as though she

knows something is there but she can't quite see it" (237). Suddenly her mother disappears and she believes she has transformed into one of the jays.

Her father appears to her in a similar vision on the day in which Joe comes back on the island looking for her. She is not willing to be found, because she perceives all humans as American intruders and she states "they can't be trusted. They'll mistake me for a human" (238). Their voice seems to her like "a foreign radio" (239) and as she escapes she hurts a foot. When they are gone she goes back to the wilderness surrounding the cabin and she sees her father:

He is standing near the fence with his back to me, looking in at the garden.

[...]

I say Father.

He turns towards me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone.

I'm not frightened, it's too dangerous for me to be frightened of it; it gazes at me for a time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes, depthless but lambent [...]

It does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself.

Then its head swings away with an awkward, almost crippled motion. I do not interest it, I am part of the landscape, I could be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock.

I see now that although it isn't my father it is what my father has become. I knew he wasn't dead. (242-243)

However, when she approaches the area where the ghost of her father was standing, she can see footprints, but they “are too small, they have toes” and she discovers they are her own footprints and she starts doubting she has seen her own reflection. In shamanism visions are induced by an altered state which can be reached through “fasting, purification rituals, bathing in cold water, exposure to cold, lack of sleep, and drugs” (Guédon, 105) when the person is isolated from the community. Dehumanization takes place when the power enters the shaman and when s/he receives the gift of the spirits, s/he can return to the human world.

As a matter of fact, the protagonist of *Surfacing* summoned the ghosts of her parents by offering them food. In fact, she throws into the fire, “food for the dead”, but she could not clearly remember “if you fed them enough they would come back [...] or [...] if you fed them enough they would stay away” (198). She also was exposed to lack of proper food and sleep and she possibly ingests venomous fungi, which may have caused her hallucinating. However, the vision of her parents marks the climax of her descent into controlled madness and into her sorrow. In fact, she has “a dream about them, the way they were when they were alive and becoming older” (245), meaning that she has overcome the pain for their loss and the process of healing and rebirth is now complete. On the following day she accepts the fact that “they have gone finally, back into the earth, the air, the water, wherever they were when I summoned them” (245) and she believes they have visited her when she was in a state of trance.

“To prefer life, I owe them that” (245) and she is grateful they made her understand this. Now she is able to look at them as ordinary individuals and not as gods. In fact,

I try to think for the first time what it was like to be them: our father, islanding his life, protecting both us and himself, in the midst of war and in a poor country, the effort it must have taken to sustain his illusions of reason and benevolent order [...] Our mother, collecting the seasons and the weather and her children's faces, the meticulous records that allowed her to omit the other things, the pain and isolation and whatever it was she was fighting against [...] They are out of reach now, they belong to themselves, more than ever. (247)

The power is gone and she returns from her dive into the wilderness to the human dimension. Now she has accepted "herself and reality" and "she is [...] fully herself and fully human" (Guédon 109), she is whole again, thanks to nature. She acknowledges she has been unable to cope with the pain and mortality of the ones she loved. Now she is "filled with inner strength" and "she is almost ready to return to society with a desire and a willingness to redefine her subject position" (Staels 66) and she states her role of active subject. She goes back to the cabin and wears her damaged clothes and she is aware she has to return to civilization. As for the Americans, she thinks "they exist, they are advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied" (247). Then she turns to the mirror she had turned to the wall and she restores its position. Her reflection is that of "a creature neither animal nor human" (248), who has returned from the land of the dead.

Now that she returned from her inner journey, she is convinced she can no longer stay on the island, but she has to go back to her "own time", like a "time-traveller", with the difference that now she is whole again and she has healed the fracture between

head and body, rationality and emotions. She has restored her creative energy and she is also carrying a life in her, conveying hope for the future. However, when Joe arrives a second time on the island, she hides behind a tree and she considers what kind of existence could be possible for her and what will be the destiny of her relationship with Joe. Returning to the city and to the present tense seems to be the only viable solution for her, but now the readers get the impression that she cannot be relegated to the role of victim any longer and she is capable of dealing with menaces instead of escaping them. In order to restore her humanity she has to enter the city and reintegrate into society and Joe seems to be the person who “may potentially give her love and life” (Staels 68).

The protagonist’s descent into the depths of the lake mirrors her descent into her inner self, which resembles a labyrinth, and it is in this inner journey that she is confronted with her repressed past and her painful memories. Her quest for truth and for her real self occurs in isolation and withdrawal from civilization and it takes the shape of “a perilous journey into the darkness” (Rao 21). Recalling the grail motifs, the narrator may be assimilated both to the knight searching for the Holy Grail and the Fisher King of the grail legends.

“The knight, in order to save a sick society or king, undertakes a risky journey; he faces various adventures culminating in the Perilous Chamber, where he usually undergoes a terrifying experience” (Rao 23). Only after many challenges he can reach the Grail. Similarly, the protagonist of *Surfacing* is confronted with “frightening shapes [...] reminiscent of the knight’s encounter with a corpse in the Perilous Chamber” (Rao 23). After this vision, her Grail appears to her, namely the vision of her aborted child “suspended in the air [...] like a chalice” (183) and this is extremely relevant so that she

can admit that she had fabricated false memories of the abortion story in order to cope with the pain of her loss. Finally, “in the Grail legend the successful quest involves a celebration of power, energy and fertility” (Rao 23). Similarly, in *Surfacing* the narrator reestablishes her fertility by conceiving a second child with Joe and this moment is cathartic since she can sense her previous child forgiving her.

During her quest for truth she is confronted “by horrors of physical and spiritual death and guilt in the ‘Chapel Perilous’ or ‘Perilous Chamber’”, as we have seen. The protagonist of *Surfacing* enters it when diving into the lake, a sacred place where she can gain access to the world of the gods of nature. Under water she sees her father’s corpse, which helps her understand her guilt since she was an accomplice in aborting her fetus. This climatic moment, together with the visions of her parents’ spirits and accepting their legacies, contributes to make her become whole again, to heal her fragmented self and she also gains a new perspective on past and future. Moreover she refuses to play the role of passive victim and she reestablishes her power of motherhood, which had been previously limited by her former lover, and by patriarchal society more generally.

As far as the Fisher King motif is concerned, at the beginning of *Surfacing* the protagonist is in a state of illness, like the Fisher King in the legend: she is experiencing “repression, waste, and emotional coolness” because she has “fallen victim to some of the false values which are laying waste her land [...] and contemporary civilization” (Thomas 75) perpetrated by the Americans. On the other hand, her mother “fulfils the role of spiritually healthy double of the Fisher King” (Thomas 75). The narrator’s mother is a mysterious figure, as we have noted, and she is associated with jays, which are

symbols for “humility and grace” (Thomas 75). Moreover, she attributes to her mother the power of raising the dead when she saved her brother from drowning. This memory is a way for the narrator to approach the traumatic memory of her abortion, and she is able to take responsibility for this act when she acknowledges the falsity of her memories and the construction of the “paper house”.

The aborted baby may be connected to the grail motif because the fetus may be associated with a fish, which “the narrator has not successfully fished [...] through childbirth from the amniotic fluid of the womb” (Thomas 76). Consequently, we may assume her mother is a successful fisher and life-giver, a “woman transformed to mother” (Thomas 77) and the narrator, who fails to give birth to her first child, has to deal with a “repressed sense of maternal inadequacy” (Thomas 76) because she failed to give life, she was not able to play the role of fisher successfully and she did not transform from woman to mother. Thus, her second pregnancy acquires redemptive powers and she is willing to demonstrate she is capable of becoming a mother and a successful fisher as well.

Conclusion

The first part of this dissertation has attempted to read closely the first chapter of *Surfacing* in order to show how the order of textual elements contributes to create the novel's meaning, taking into consideration the theory of Literary Dynamics by Perry and the employment of the simultaneous present tense, explained in Phelan's essay. I tried to demonstrate how cognitive mechanisms are employed to infer and fill in the gaps in the narration and how frames and scripts that we acquire from ordinary everyday life can be referred to in order to make sense of a text.

Owing to this accurate analysis of Atwood's word choices, we have observed how the major themes of the novel emerged from the very beginning of the narration. For example, the first lines of *Surfacing* convey a sense of estrangement from reality on the protagonist's part and the motifs of change and returning are clearly detectable. Moreover, we saw how hints of the uneven relationship between men and women in the context of the patriarchal society, elements of feminism, ecology and trauma, as well as religion and other issues are scattered through the whole first chapter.

I chose to analyse and provide an interpretation for the themes of trauma, nature and spirituality, since, in my opinion, a reflection upon them may be relevant to understand *Surfacing*. In fact, these three major topics may represent three important steps in the protagonist's process of rebirth. By acknowledging that her abortion was psychologically unbearable for her and that she had to fabricate false memories to cope with this trauma, she is able to admit she also was responsible for the death of her child. Consequently, she becomes conscious of the fact that she is not only a victim, but a victimizer as well, since she also inflicted pain in other creatures when she was a child,

and the deaths of those creatures were as senseless and avoidable as the death of her fetus. This leads her to reflect upon nature and its role and about the fact that she has lost contact with the land when she moved to the city. As a child she was in a much closer relationship to nature but she was not as innocent as she believed she was.

During her stay on the island, memories of her parents surface and she realizes they were models to follow in order to learn how to survive in the wilderness and this represents a further step in her rebirth process. Finally, when she plunges in a state of controlled insanity and elements of shamanism are introduced in the narrative, without clearly mentioning this creed, she has visions of her parents' ghosts. The visions represent the climactic moment of her regressive journey into nature and her inner self in a timeless dimension. Thanks to the visions she is able to face the pain for their loss and she can return to the human world and reenter her own time as a new person. All the binary oppositions have been reconciled since she managed to restore the division between head and body, her animal and her rational component of her self and she reconciled the conflict between nature and civilization, male and female, victim and victimizer.

When the emotional confusion has been overcome by the narrator and she has reemerged from her journey, she goes back to the cabin, whose contents she had destroyed "to escape from the contained, domestic sphere of femininity" (Bouson 58), she looks at her reflection in the mirror and she observes she has transformed into a "natural woman, state of nature" (248). She appears as "a creature neither animal nor human, furless, only a dirty blanket, shoulders huddled over into a crouch, eyes staring blue as ice from the deep sockets; the lips move by themselves" (248) and she realizes

she perfectly fits the stereotype of insanity and this represents a danger, since she may be put into “the hospital or the zoo” because the civilized people “would never believe it’s only a natural woman” (248). With this image, Atwood is opposing the stereotype of the attractive woman which Anna tries to conform to.

The narrator wears her damaged clothes again and prepares herself to go back to the city, but she still has doubts. In fact, she is depicted as standing behind a tree, while Joe is calling her name because he wants her to go back to the city with him. Despite the protagonist’s awareness of the fact that she cannot live alone on a deserted island immersed in the Canadian wilderness, she is hesitating. She is also aware of the fact that she is a different person and the readers get the impression she will not be relegated to the role of passive victim any longer. She is reflecting about her relationship with Joe and what future could possible for them and the potential life she hopes she is carrying. What can he offer to her? “Captivity in any of its forms” or “a new freedom?” (250).

If she goes back with him, she will have to revise her idea of love, symbolized by the wooden couple “in the barometer house at Paul’s” (46), “condemned to oscillate back and forth, sun and rain, without escape” (177) in a perfect balance “almost like peace” (177). Now she admits her idea of love was abstract and “wooden houses are obsolete” because “we can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other, the way it was before” (250). They can no longer avoid each other’s presence and avoid to communicate: on the contrary, “the intercession of words” is necessary (250) and also her emotional involvement, she can no longer feed him “unlimited supplies of nothing” (106). She also considers the possibility their relationship may fail and that it will be

painful, but she seems she will be able to accept it because “that’s normal, it’s the way it happens now” (251).

She also ponders about the fact that Joe may be “sent as a trick” by the Americans, and he may represent a menace for her because she fears she can be manipulated as it happened in her previous affair, but he is not one of them, “he isn’t anything, he is only half-formed, and for that reason” the narrator can trust him (251). However, she tenses “forward, towards the demands and questions”, but her “feet do not move yet” (251). She can hear his voice calling her and she perceives he is starting to feel “annoyed” and thus “he won’t wait much longer” (251), although he is not leaving yet. She hesitates again and she looks at the land once more: “the lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing” (251).

The closure of *Surfacing* is left open and it conveys a sense of doubt in the readers. Moreover, although there is hope in the final scene, isolation and despair may be detected by the reader. In fact, a mild optimism emerges from the protagonist’s decision not to be a victim any longer and from the fact that she preferred life thanks to her parents’ gifts. However, pessimism may surface in the reader because when the narrator chooses “to return to normality” after she underwent such a journey in time and in world of spirits, “she has no society in which to report back her success” (qtd. in Bouson 60) and this constitutes the reason why she is still hesitating to go back to the city. As a consequence, the ending appears as “tentative”, provisional and “indeterminate” (qtd. in Bouson 60).

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