

**The Atwood Chronicles:
The Lake, the Forest and
the Ravine**

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Abstract

*Human society is frequently referred to in opposition to the natural world – civilization, stereotypes, reason versus primitivism, savagery, instincts. Three locations are prevalent in Margaret Atwood's novels: the lake, the forest and the ravine, in which the protagonists immerse and from which they exit completely changed. These three elements are labyrinthine places symbolic of change, otherness and the unconscious. Once the characters enter these 'magical' places, they learn to gain strength and control over their own lives. Contact with nature thus stands for ritual transformation, realization and rejection of the victim position which the society imposes on the protagonists. They reassert their identity, usually by remembering the past and will return to the urban world as powerful individuals. On a broader level, the protagonists' search for a voice/ identity of their own is paralleled by Canada's attempt to define her own identity. Atwood seems to offer her answer to what Canadianness is in *Surfacing*, where the unnamed narrator simultaneously re-members her own painful and repressed experiences into her new identity as a stronger woman and the Native American legacy into Canadian identity.*

ملخص

كثيرا ما يشار إلى المجتمع البشري على أنه نقيض المجتمع الطبيعي—حضارة، قوالب العقل مقابل البدائية، الوحشية والغرائز. ثلاثة مواقع منتشرة في روايات ما رغريت أتوود: البحيرة، الغابة والوادي، حيث يغوص الأبطال ليخرجوا بشكل مغاير تماما. هذه العناصر الثلاثة هي أماكن معقدة ترمز للتغيير و للأخر، وللشعور. بمجرد دخول الشخصية في هذه الأماكن السحرية تتعلم إكتساب القوة والتحكم في حياتها و الاتصال مع الطبيعة

يمثل إذا التغير الطبيعي، و التوصل إلى إنجازات ورفض موقف الضحية التي يفرضها المجتمع على الأبطال. يحاول هؤلاء الأبطال إثبات هويتهم عادة باستحضار الماضي ثم العودة إلى العالم المتمدن كأشخاص أقوياء. و على صعيد أوسع، يبحث الأبطال عن صوت هوية لأنفسهم في محاولة توازي مبادرة كندا للتعريف بهويتها. و تبدو أن آتود قد أعطت إجابتها فيما يخص الإنتماء الكندي حيث تقوم الراوية المجهولة بإدماج تجارب المرارة والقمع التي عاشتها في هويتها الجديدة كإمرأة قوية وإدماج الإرث المحلي الأمريكي في الهوية الكندية.

The representation of Canadian identity is one of the most difficult issues to tackle even nowadays. Justin D. Edwards (2005:xiv) defines the country as an “in-between space”, at the crossroads of the English and French languages, and of British and American cultural and economic influences. Margaret Atwood (2004b:26) talks about Canada as a “state of mind”, a space where one can easily lose oneself, mostly due to the fact that the majority of Canadians, except the Native Americans, are from somewhere else. Having settled in Canada, members of different ethnicities and races brought with them not only their customs and traditions, but also their languages. Therefore, the process of building a coherent Canadian identity is a painstaking process.

Canada’s “northern grotesque” (Edwards 2005:xv) – i.e. its peripheral position in relation to power centres – is mirrored by Atwood’s female protagonists, who are peripheral in relation to patriarchy. Canada’s in-between-ness entails an incomplete sense of identity, a continual search for the “ghostly Other”, much like Atwood’s characters who are in quest of their true selves. Just as the elusive Canadianness haunts Canadians, Atwood’s female characters have their own ghosts they need to deal with, in particular the stereotypes imposed on them by the patriarchal order of things. In the process of coming to terms with repressed past experiences, they establish a deeper or more superficial contact with the natural world. This experience enables them to achieve a non-patriarchal spirituality – the Nature Goddess (Warren 1993) – which gives women greater abilities to control their lives, and thus survive physically and spiritually, by recognizing their victim position and rejecting it (Culpeper 1989).

In what follows, I shall discuss four basic ways in which Atwood's women relate to nature: they may identify with it; they may use it for escaping the routine and the strict patterns of society; an experience in or a contact with the natural world may represent a turning point in their lives; or nature appears in terms of (animal) instinctuality.

Given the fact that Canada stretches over a vast part of the North American continent, space – and wilderness in particular – seems to play a significant role. It is then not surprising that a writer such as Margaret Atwood has focused in her novels on the concept of wilderness as a key element in the construction of identity.

Wilderness has been perceived as having ambivalent features: as an unexplored place, where (white, untrained) people can easily get lost and killed, but also as a space of freedom and regeneration. However, the most prominent characteristic of all appears to be its 'otherness', mysterious and threatening, which inspires a feeling of "gothic sublime", especially in relation to the colonizing white man, and makes him explore the labyrinth of his subconscious.

When describing Canadian wilderness and when setting the scenery of her novels, Margaret Atwood makes extensive use of three elements – the forest and the lake which appear in various forms in all her novels, and are labyrinthine places symbolic of change, otherness and the unconscious (Chevalier, Gheerbrandt 1982:455-456), and the ravine (wilderness trapped in the city), simultaneously causing a break in the urban order and creating a passage to the underworld.

Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (2001) is centered on the lake and the forest as key elements of Canadian wilderness. Throughout the book, the lake represents a literal and symbolic centerpiece and is doubled by the forest, both standing for archetypal images of the unconscious and the mother/ female principle (Jung 2003:28, 92). The unnamed narrator begins her search for her missing father on a path twisting not only into the wilderness, but back into the past, and then on the lake which surrounds the island where she spent her childhood with her family.

Cirlot (qtd. in Fraim 2001:7) connects water-symbolism with the symbolism of the abyss, which stands for a transition between life and death. Connecting the superficial (surface) and the profound (depth), the lake suggests from the very beginning the protagonist's symbolic immersion into her past when she pushes herself "reluctantly into the

lake” (Atwood 2001:69). Her dives trigger such repressed experiences as the separation from her family and the abortion imposed on her by her former lover, and stand for the beginning of her coming to terms with her past and becoming a stronger woman.

After her lover Joe and her friends leave the island without her, the protagonist undergoes a shamanistic ritual which includes a symbolic (re)baptism in the lake where she has found both her father’s body and a sacred Indian site. Copeland Nagle (2005) identifies in his study five spiritual (religious) values of wilderness deriving from biblical readings; wilderness is thus a land to be preserved since it was created by God, a place where one can encounter divinity, a place of spiritual renewal, a place of escape, and a place of spiritual testing. The island with its lake and forest thus becomes the place where Atwood’s protagonist undergoes a spiritual testing and encounters (pagan) divinity. Connecting surface and depth, past and present, the lake enables the heroine to reconnect with the archaic Mother Earth and to gain strength and control over her own life by being able to break the patterns and norms imposed on her by society. After the shamanistic trance, the narrator manages to recover the treasure hidden in the wilderness of the island and learn the lesson of the Natives – that humans are part of nature – and re-assert her identity as a stronger woman. On a broader level, Atwood’s protagonist remembers the Native American legacy into Canadian identity, since plunging into deep waters means returning to one’s origins (Benoist 1995:73).

The lake is also present in *Lady Oracle* (1977) as the natural setting where the protagonist Joan stages her suicide. Standing for a natural mirror (Fraim 2001:7), the lake also symbolizes Joan’s split identity as Joan Foster, the slim woman close to the patriarchal ideal of feminine beauty, as Louisa K. Delacourt (name borrowed from her aunt), the gothic romance novelist, and as the Fat Lady, Joan’s childhood alter ego, which keeps haunting her into her adult life.

Staels (1995:70) considers the main leitmotif of the novel to be Joan’s self-image. Joan has always felt that her mother did not accept her existence and did not give her unconditional love because she did not rise up to her expectations, namely thin and flawless, rather than fat. After the traumatic experience of the “mothball”, Joan starts suffering from the fear that she is always the wrong image in the eyes of others in general and her mother’s in particular. Mothers seem to be

the ones whose authority is higher in terms of looks and conduct, namely women are the ones who perpetrate the appropriate codes of conduct for young women. Joan is made thus to appear in the eyes of others and her own as a monster-figure, a deviation from the natural/normal. Refusing to be what her mother wants her to be, Joan defines herself against this image, but paradoxically dreams of being “a role model, a stereotype, a perfect image in the mirror (in the eyes of man)” (Staels 1995:73). She will finally gain the “body of a goddess” (Atwood 1977:141) as requires the condition for inheriting her aunt’s fortune.

Although Joan has planned her “death carefully, unlike my life” (Atwood 1977:3), her body loses control and falls overboard ungracefully: “The boat swung, the sail collapsed, Sam ducked, and the flailing boom hit me in the small of the back and knocked me overboard. I was unprepared and got a mouthful of unprocessed Lake Ontario water as I sank” (Atwood 1977:305). Her fat self continues to haunt her even though she has tried to copy the image of the perfect lady and has ended up trapped in “traditional femininity which society holds up to her like a mirror” (Staels 1995:85). Joan has started writing popular costume gothics under a pseudonym for a living because it is only romance that offers her an escape from reality and from a society that torments her with the feminine ideal.

Images of drowning and broken glass often appear in both Joan’s life and fiction, suggesting an overlapping of the two and a multitude of selves (fat child, costume gothics writer, poetess, and wife and lover both in her real life as in her novels). Besides her mock-suicide which is meant as a separation between herself and the judgmental attitude of others, Joan’s dreams are haunted by an overlapping of her own life and that of the characters she creates for her novels. In her dream, an extremely fat and dripping wet ghost of Felicia (Joan’s alter ego in her costume gothic ‘Love Defied’) says to Redmond, “...it was such an effort, Arthur, to get out of that water”, which puzzles Redmond, who asks, “Who is Arthur?” (Atwood 1977:324). This overlapping between reality and fiction is indicative of the fact that Joan sees her own life in terms of a gothic romance. Moreover, she uses spirituality (mirror trances) to become creative in her automatic writing sessions, and it is writing/ creativity which helps her gain strength to survive in a (patriarchal) society that did not accept her fat/ true self, but an idealized image of femininity.

The lake (as microcosm) is replaced by the ocean (covering up to 70 per cent of our planet's surface, as macrocosm) in Margaret Atwood's latest novel *Oryx and Crake* (2004a). After an ecological disaster, Jimmy/ Snowman (Atwood's first masculine narratorial voice), the only human survivor (until the end of the novel) has led a group of humanoid creatures called Crakers out of the laboratory where they were created into the wilderness, which he teaches them to call home, in order to ensure their survival. Their so-called Eden is established near the shore of the ocean "littered with the wreckage of a civilization very similar to our own" (Howells 2005:170). It is near the ocean shore – suggestive of his own subconscious – that Snowman remembers his life and friendship to Oryx and Crake and the worldwide disaster caused by the latter, which led to his and Oryx's own deaths. The nicknames of the two characters in the title are derived from a game that the two boys in the book, Jimmy and Glenn, used to play – "Extinctathon": the oryx being a species of African antelope, while the crake a rare Australian bird. The names of animals on the verge of extinction suggest the "extinction" of the characters in the title, for Crake will not die alone in his trying to subjugate the world to science, but, in his egotism, he will take Oryx with him to be united in and by death. Having fallen in love with Oryx but having lost her to Crake, Snowman's only opportunity of still keeping her close to him is by resurrecting her as Mother Goddess in the 'mythological' creation he designs for the Crakers, and by living in the forest/ jungle near the ocean shore, as symbols of the female principle (Jung 2003:92, Cirlot qtd. in Fraim 2001:4).

The ocean, doubled by the forest, is meant as a mother-archetype for the stranded "children of Crake" (Atwood 2004a:96), whom Crake meant to be "a species with a better chance to survive in a damaged ecosystem" (Ingersoll 2004) and who have learnt to worship Oryx as their Mother Goddess of nature and animals. The parallel with the biblical dark-skinned "children of Ham" is obvious here, even though these new humanoids have green skin. The Crakers feel reluctant to fish in the ocean, because they do not want to upset this goddess, even though Snowman's life depends on this kind of food. They share the responsibility of killing another creature so that no one in particular would feel guilty of upsetting the balance of nature for spilling the blood of one of "the children of Oryx" (Atwood 2004a:96), i.e. of animals.

Unlike “the children of Crake” (Atwood 2004a:96), who can live on clover and even recycle their own excrements, Snowman has to eat meat. This appears as a sort of monstrosity in the eyes of the new creatures, who consider him “a separate order of being” (Atwood 2004a:101), even more so since he is believed to be the only one – or rather the last – of his kind. The anomaly of this new world in which the human was replaced by the monstrous is also reflected in Snowman’s ironic self-naming: “The Abominable Snowman – existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints” (Atwood 2004a:8).

Left without food, Jimmy/ Snowman decides to return into the devastated city, to Crake’s – the archetypal “homo faber” (DiMarco 2005) or a new “variety of Dr. Frankenstein” (Ingersoll 2004) – Paradise laboratory, meant as a repetition of the biblical story about the Garden of Eden. However, in Atwood’s novel, it is precisely the creator, the God-like Crake, who will cause the repetition of the fall of ‘Man’, or rather of the humanoid Crakers. Paradise is also a pun on ‘paradise’ and ‘dice’, suggesting the twist of fate and the chance for survival offered by its protection, since Snowman manages to survive the catastrophe under the protection of the laboratory glass vault, watching the extinction of the world as if on a television screen.

Snowman’s journey through the forest that surrounds the city is very similar to a journey into the Underworld, a wandering “like a ghost through the ruins of his past life” (Howells 2005:185), during which he meets new sorts of monsters and demons – the result of genetically engineered species – in the shape of enormous crabs and feral pigeons. He will emerge from this underworld with a “new frame of mind” (Howells 2005:182), i.e. a new perspective, having gained self-knowledge and becoming aware that he may not be the last human survivor after all.

Images of forest/ wilderness are also present in *Cat’s Eye* (1989) and *Surfacing* (2001). If the protagonist of *Surfacing* goes into the forest to look for her missing father and initially thinks that it was the forest that caused his insanity by erasing his identity (an allusion to the settlers’ experiences described by Susanna Moodie in her *Roughing It in the Bush*), the heroine of *Cat’s Eye* describes the wilderness of her childhood as idyllic.

Wilderness is for young Elaine Risley the place where she enjoys living with her loving family, away from the rules and norms of society, which imposed certain standards of behaviour. When Elaine, her parents and her brother move to Toronto, she becomes unhappy, and as she remembers her childhood, Elaine describes her wilderness experience as positive in opposition to her life in the city. As her father is a scientist, she respects the natural world and enjoys, together with her brother, learning about the life of bugs, worms and caterpillars.

As a child, Elaine is totally adapted to rural living, and defecating in the bush does not trouble her, unlike the loud “flush toilets” in the cities, “white and alarming, where things vanish in an instant, with a roar” (Atwood 1989:25). When her family moves to Toronto because of her father’s job at the university, she has trouble adapting to city life and its pressures. The only thing she wished for when in the wilderness was some girlfriends about whom she found out in books. However, her image of such companions is not realistic, since books have offered her a distorted image of society. Life in the city requires “social camouflage” (Culpeper 1989), and Elaine and her mother now need to wear gender specific clothes such as dresses or skirts, while her father begins to wear suits. However, her camouflage does not seem effective because, when Elaine finally manages to make three friends – Carol, Grace and Cordelia, they turn out to be a sort of witches (reminding readers of Shakespeare’s “weird sisters”), painfully torturing Elaine by mocking her clothes, manners and home, and perceiving her as a social outcast. To be accepted by them, Elaine accepts their manipulations and tries to follow the rituals of the society to which she wishes to belong, but develops cannibalistic instincts of self-mutilation, biting her lips and tearing the skin off her heels. She nevertheless finds her protective amulet against their evil-eye in a cat’s eye marble, which enables her to gradually become indifferent to them and more confident in herself. Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath, Grace’s mother, will still haunt her throughout her adult life until Elaine, having re-seen her childhood with an adult’s eyes, finally becomes a stronger woman, able to understand and forgive.

If the city is ordered by the rules/ laws of man, the dark wilderness is chaotic and governed by the laws of nature. It is in the wilderness that the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* (2001) escapes the fixed patterns of (patriarchal) society and transgresses her

stereotypical role as woman by stepping into her father's shoes and impersonating the male explorer, teaching her companions the basics of survival in the wilderness: "to fish, to hunt, to split logs, to build fires" (Plessix Gray 1988:132).

Throughout her ritual of transformation, i.e. coming to terms with her past, the protagonist – now alone in the sacred space of the island – blurs the distinction between human and nature/ animal, behaving like an animal and feeding on roots and wild fruit and waiting for her fur to grow. During her trance, she gets into contact with the Native gods and, experiencing the otherness as "a state of mind" (Atwood 2004b:26), undergoes a spiritual process of finding "an authentic selfhood" (Özdemir 2003:65). She identifies an ancestor in a leopard frog with gold-rimmed eyes, and she herself becomes "a tree leaning", and later "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" (Atwood 2001:175). After her imposed abortion, whose memory the protagonist has so far repressed, "her true self left her body, becoming trapped in her mind" and thus generating schizophrenic behaviour (Özdemir 2003:67). It is through this natural experience of identifying with nature as space and with the help of Native totemic animals that the protagonist manages to heal her body and mind outside the maddening stereotypical society, becoming a stronger personality able to make her own decisions.

Nevertheless, *Surfacing* (2001) is not the only novel in which Atwood identifies her protagonist with a natural element. The same occurs in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1993), where Offred, who used to consider her body as an instrument of seduction, now describes it as a cloud, important only for what it can make develop inside – the baby:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will... Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. (Atwood 1993: 70)

In the totalitarian state of Gilead, patriarchal to the extreme, women have been ascribed certain stereotypical roles: Wives (of high-rank officers), Marthas (servants), Handmaids (whose only purpose is to

bear children to high-rank officers), and Econowives (a mixture of the three for lower officers and soldiers). Besides them, there are also the sterile or ill 'unwomen', sent to collect toxic waste in the colonies. In ecofeminist terms (Warren 1993), women's plight is paralleled to environmental destruction by male-identified abuse. These 'unwomen' seem to resemble savages 'colonized' by patriarchy and kept away from society, but doing its dirty work, like slaves hidden from sight since they have no womanly purpose.

In a country where the state enforces a strict control of women's bodies, the individual identities of women, and of Handmaids in particular, are erased, the patriarchal society aiming at disembodiment of women, whose inner lives would come to be totally conditioned by Gilead's moral and religious law. The Handmaids' status is that of mere property of the Commanders; they do not even have their own name, but a combination of the officer's first name preceded by the possessive particle "of", as in "Offred", "Ofglen" or "Ofwarren". It is in this context that Offred's memories – by means of which she tries to secretly maintain her true identity (Staels (1995:163) argues that Offred's real name is June) – may become threatening and lead to de-individuation if she does not establish clear 'landmarks': "I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory" (Atwood 1993:70). In other words, Offred's outward submission to Gileadian laws may ruin her inward resistance if she is not careful.

Before the state turned absolutist and she was forced to become a Handmaid, Offred had tried to cross the border through a forest, which proved to be filled with a new sort of monsters – soldiers – that separated her from her daughter and perhaps killed her husband. The forest that surrounds Gilead (developed on the territory of USA), and which Offred tries to cross in her attempt to escape, functions as an opaque wall delimiting the totalitarian state from the rest of the world. The absolutist regime of Gilead appears thus like a symbolic island, trying to impose its rules and politics on the bodies of women, much like the people in M. Night Shyamalan's film *The Village*. But if in the film people's belief that the forest surrounding their village is inhabited by a mythical race of creatures, who may kill them if they trespass, does not prevent some villagers to venture into the dark territory, Atwood's absolutist patriarchal society does not allow

women any opportunity to escape. It is only with the help of a male character that Offred is smuggled to Canada, into safety.

Just as Offred tries to run away from the theocratic Gileadian regime, so does Marian – Atwood’s heroine of *The Edible Woman* (1978) – in trying to escape the commitment of a heterosexual relationship (Melley 1996:78). Culpeper (1989) argues that the most powerful of social rituals in strengthening the existing power patterns within society is the courtship ritual, which he likens to hunting. Courting is thus paralleled to a hunting, in which man is the hunter and woman the hunted. As the wedding approaches, Atwood’s protagonist Marian MacAlpin comes to consider her fiancé Peter more and more threatening to her identity as a woman. When Peter describes the gutting of a rabbit, Marian identifies with it and behaves like a frightened animal herself. It is the moment when she loses control over her body and her feet seem to move without her, as she runs away from her fiancé, who hounds her down. Following Culpeper’s (1989) line of thought, this escape would enact one of the courtship rituals in which the woman/ bait withdraws in order to flaunt the man/ pursuer/ hunter. When Peter reaches her, Marian is somewhat relieved at being caught and acts passively, allowing Peter to display his authority, as part of the courtship ritual. After their arrival at a friend’s apartment, Marian’s frightened animal instincts surface again, and she hides under the bed expecting Peter to look for her. Again, Peter’s hunter instincts are flattered and he strengthens his authority by treating Marian like a child and stroking her hair. Since she is really afraid, Marian cannot seem to understand how her flight is part of courting and how Peter’s power over her becomes stronger and stronger. Marian’s sense of anxiety about his threatening power recalls the anxiety of the prey cornered by the hunter. Marian’s flight and hiding also suggest women’s position in a society in which their status is established through men, who regulate what women should look like, what they should wear, and how they should behave. In order to escape the uneasiness of her engagement to Peter, Marian will find her escape from this victim position into a relationship with Duncan, who is afraid of growing up and becoming a man just like she is afraid of entering womanhood.

Atwood deals with another way of escaping the victim position in *Life Before Man* (1995a), where a female character creates her own fairy-tale world, recalling Lewis’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

“Lesjeland” recreates the primeval world of the dinosaurs, in which Lesje can escape the burden of both past and present. As opposed to society, which is ordered by the laws of men, Lesje’s fantasy world is governed by the laws of nature, which teach her that camouflage is essential for survival. High up in her tree and safe from any danger, Lesje is a mere spectator of the dinosaurs’ life:

Lesje is wandering in prehistory. Under a sun more orange than her own has ever been, in the middle of a swampy plain lush with thick-stalked plants and oversized ferns, a group of bony-plated stegosaurus is grazing. [...] Closer to her, a flock of medium-sized pterosaurs glides from one giant tree-fern to another. Lesje crouches in the topmost frond-cluster of one of these trees, watching through binoculars, blissful, uninvolved. None of the dinosaurs takes the slightest interest in her.” (Atwood 1995a:18)

Howells (2005:76) discusses the savagery of Lesje’s fantastic world as a reminder of the savagery latent within the conventions of civilized life, patterns of behaviour and gender stereotypes imposed on women by a (patriarchal) society. Longing for safety and security, Lesje plays the same role of isolated observer in everyday life, too, avoiding active involvement in society and achievement in her personal life; she finds her protection in the Royal Ontario Museum, among dinosaur-bones which do not ask her for anything but her attention.

Unsure about her identity, half Jewish and half Ukrainian, Lesje wants to remain anonymous – “the next best thing to being invisible” (Atwood 1995a:18) – and wears protectively coloured clothing such as “denims and subdued classics” (Atwood 1995a:26). She hides her appetites and needs (Wilson 2005:194) and is contented with a surface relationship with William. His finding out about her relationship with Nate and his attempting “to reclaim the disputed ‘territory’ of Lesje’s body” (Wilson 2005:196) – as if they were two competitive male animals – triggers Lesje’s reaction and her first step out of the victim position by moving out of William’s apartment and later, by deciding to build a family together with Nate.

When Elizabeth, Atwood’s other main female character in *Life Before Man* (1995), becomes estranged from her husband, finally

losing him to another woman, and when her lover Chris commits suicide, she manages to surmount her depression by focusing on her children and making sure they would not experience the same traumas as she had. To survive and heal her soul after the shock of her lover's suicide, Elizabeth scatters pieces of fur – symbolic of his profession as taxidermist, and at the same time of a furry totemic animal that is supposed to guide Chris's spirit to the underworld where he too could find his rest. Being an opening in the ground, and suggesting both a devouring mouth and the uterine cervix, both death and rebirth (Morris 1994:206), the ravine is closer to the womb of the earth, and therefore, the communion with Mother Nature is stronger felt. Simultaneously, the ravine is the natural/ wilderness element trapped within the Canadian city and the place where the laws of (modern) man no longer apply. It is thus not by chance, that Elizabeth performs her private pagan burial ritual above a ravine, suggesting a Native American ritual of burial according to which the dead person's soul was guided towards the netherworld by his/her totemic animal.

Chris is the absent character in *Life Before Man* (1995), who exists through the other characters' representations of him. If all the other characters either consider or fake suicide, Chris is the only one who actually carries the action out and – in Wilson's (2005:182) words – stands for the “amputating alienation threatening to overtake the characters as well as Canada, the grey-skyed, ‘morbid nation’ that identifies itself with the dead”. Indeed, Canadian identity seems much under the influence of a “ghostly Other” (Edwards 2005:xx), be it the Native Americans, killed and pushed into reservations by white colonizers, or the immigrants' own ethnic identities which they brought when they settled in Canada.

As I have mentioned before, the ravine, similarly to the cave, establishes a closer link with Mother Nature and stands for fertility and sexuality, for an entrance to the underworld – or, to the subconscious, since earth is a devouring element, but at the same time an element of (re)birth. The ravine is the place where the city is replaced by wilderness, where the laws of society are fissured by the laws of nature, the space where the female principle is stronger than the male. It is the space which male ordering cannot fully control.

In *Lady Oracle* (1977), little Joan is told that ravines are dangerous places with strange men that harm young girls. Situated under ground level, the ravine also suggests women's trapped

sexuality and their feeling of constantly being watched/ stalked by men as part of their “strongly constituted identity”, while women’s identity is based on being watched (Freud qtd. in Melley 1996:77). This “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 1975) transforms women into “bodies of desire” (Davis in Leitch, 2002:41), i.e. sexual objects, to be devoured by the male gaze.

The descent into the ravine enables Atwood’s female characters to gain more power over their own lives and reassert their identities as stronger women, who manage to survive in a society whose rules and regulations are laid down by men. Thus in *Cat’s Eye* (1989), when Elaine descends into the ravine, as if into the Underworld and experiences near death, she emerges as a stronger personality. The metaphor of the ravine as gate to the netherworld is strengthened by the creek flowing on its bottom from the cemetery nearby and reminding readers of the river Styx that surrounded hell in Greek mythology and led the spirits of the dead to their afterlife. Elaine’s protective amulet, the cat’s eye marble enters her body making her assume “cat’s eye vision” (Wilson 1996:304). Just as the core of the marble is surrounded by glass, Elaine no longer allows herself to be affected by the others’ opinion and view of her. It is the moment when her inner self begins to grow stronger, but also to lose emotions, as the cat’s eye marble enters her own body and symbolically freezes her.

Trying to get the hat which Cordelia threw into the ravine, Elaine falls into the frozen water of the creek and has a vision of the Virgin Mary dressed in black, which she will later identify with the Mexican Virgin of Lost Things. Black comes to symbolize and emphasize the spiritual death of the protagonist, but at the same time rebirth and transformation (Benoist 1995:89). In Culpeper’s (1989) opinion, the Virgin stands for Elaine’s own will, and it is this will to live – the survival instinct – which gives Elaine the necessary strength to get out of the icy water. The arrival of her own mother overlaps with the image of the Virgin in Elaine’s mind and the vision disappears so suddenly that she cannot believe it actually happened.

Having undergone another baptism, Elaine is now a stronger version of her former self, similarly to Achilles, whose mother bathed him in the river Styx in order to make him invulnerable. She now resembles a ‘living dead’, stronger indeed but having no emotions. However, just like Achilles had his vulnerable heel, Elaine’s vulnerable point is her artistic vision, which will finally allow her to

come to terms with her childhood tormentors. The ‘mask’ that she takes on now will fall only when she finds enough strength in herself and learns to forgive and let go of the ghosts of her past.

Culpeper (1989) discusses Elaine’s vision of the Virgin in the ravine, when she was only a child, as symbolic of her attempt to survive the emotional terrorism of her so-called friends. Later, the vision comes to stand for the power to create. It is art and artistic vision which help Elaine undergo a healing process of reuniting her split identity and reasserting her ‘I’ as a woman and artist.

Elaine’s final descent into the ravine, after she has forgiven her childhood tormentors, may be paralleled to a return to the womb of the Great Goddess or Earth-Mother, which enables Elaine to be reborn, to recover emotion and thus heal her split identity. The bridge is present, reminding of a connection between present and past, body and spirit, the relationship between shape and the shapeless, what is present and what is lacking – in other words, Elaine and Cordelia.

The ravine and its withered vegetation are metaphors of the characters’ numbed inner selves. In *The Edible Woman* (1978), Marian and Duncan descend into the ravine that fissures the city, as if into an underground space:

they were off the sidewalk now, slithering down the road towards a fence; there was a yellow and black chequered sign that said ‘Danger’. She was afraid they would go splintering through the wooden fence and hurtle over an unseen edge [...]. (Atwood 1978:272)

The aridity of vegetation, “stiff dried branches, [...] skeletons of anonymous grey plants” (Atwood 1978:273), parallels on the outside the characters’ inner barren mental and emotional state (Staels 1995:30). As they stand on the verge of the “huge, roughly circular pit”, Marian becomes afraid and no longer wishes to explore the depths of the earth (as metaphor of her soul):

It seemed wrong to have this cavity in the city: the ravine itself was supposed to be as far down as you could go. It made her suspect the white pit-bottom also; it didn’t look solid, it looked possibly hollow, dangerous, a thin layer of ice,

as though if you walked on it you might fall
through (Atwood 1978:274).

Marian remains under the power of patterns that give her a feeling of safety, but leave her stuck in the present; therefore, the ravine experience does not lead to an immediate redefinition of her identity for the future. She will achieve a new identity once she realizes that she does not want to turn into a stereotypical feminine body to be consumed by men, and she consumes herself through the cake she makes as an image of herself.

In their asserting new identities, or re-memembering split selves, Margaret Atwood's characters frequently relate to the natural world as a protective place, which enables them to reconnect and even identify with the archetypal Earth Mother and reject the patriarchal order of things (namely the stereotypes and patterns of behaviour imposed on them – *Surfacing*), a place where life-changing experiences take place (*Cat's Eye*, *Lady Oracle*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*), or where they can escape from the pressures of city life and the laws of men (*Life Before Man*), and finally, a reflection of the character's fear of annihilation by patriarchal ideas of womanhood and her numbed inner self (*The Edible Woman*).

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