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**THE PROTAGONIST'S QUEST FOR TRANSFORMATION
IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*
BA thesis**

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ABSTRACT

Rebirth journey is a widely used theme in literature and its circumstances vary in different books. The causes for rebirth journeys and their outcomes are diverse and can be portrayed in numerous ways. The present thesis explores the theme of rebirth journey in the context of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the protagonist's quest and the way it transforms her.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two main chapters and a conclusion. The introduction presents some background information about the novel as well as the main topics that will be further discussed in this thesis. The introduction also includes the research questions and the aim of the thesis.

The first main chapter is a literature review of the main themes present in *Surfacing*. The chapter is based on the works of numerous critics who have examined the novel in detail from different theoretical perspectives and given their views on themes such as female identity, Canadian identity, nature, duality and metamorphosis. All the themes are related to the key aspects of the protagonist's quest for metamorphosis.

The second main chapter analyzes the journey itself in detail in the light of the themes discussed in the first main chapter. It is divided into three parts: the first part examines the protagonist's life before her transformation, the second part explores the process of her metamorphosis and the third one analyzes the outcome of her journey.

The conclusion provides a summary of the findings.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history women have fought for equality and wished for their voices to be heard in the patriarchal world. Even though women's social roles have become more equal to the roles of men, women are still expected to have certain traits and tasks. Women are still referred to as the weaker sex and they are expected to prioritize family over career, take care of their appearance and not flaunt their sexuality. The Canadian author Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* is a good example of a woman's search for her identity in the patriarchal world.

The novel was published in 1972 when women began demanding equal rights and their own freedom. Atwood has always been concerned with the topic of feminism and *Surfacing* was also recognized as a strong feminist novel. The book was received well by feminists at the time and also by numerous critics who have analyzed the novel decades later. Although *Surfacing* was published over 40 years ago, the values, which are explored in the novel, still appeal in today's world.

In the novel there are numerous subtopics that are concerned with larger themes such as nature, family, national identity and women's roles, but the main emphasis is on a woman's quest to find her voice in a society dominated by men. The novel follows an unnamed protagonist who feels alienated from the society and her struggle to find her place in the world. The novel echoes her resentment towards the world in general. In order to find her true self and value in society she needs to go through a transformation and change her outlook on life in general. The reader gets only glimpses of her past, her present mindset and hopes for the future and throughout the novel the reader can attempt to put the protagonist's story together like a puzzle. Analyzing the novel proves to be quite challenging as the pieces of the protagonist's life are scattered throughout the book and the narrative is fragmented.

In my thesis I am going to analyze the protagonist's rebirth journey. I have chosen to analyze the protagonist's journey in *Surfacing* in terms of metamorphosis. This approach has been chosen because metamorphosis, that is a theme widely used in literature, is a suitable framework for dealing with the change that Atwood's protagonist goes through. My aim is to find answers to the following questions:

What are the reasons for the protagonist's alienation and her resentfulness?

What characterizes her metamorphosis?

How does the metamorphosis change her mentality and opinions of society?

In order to do that, the first chapter of the thesis will provide an overview of the main themes of *Surfacing*, such as female identity, Canadian identity, nature, duality and metamorphosis, on the basis of the reception of the novel. The literature review will also discuss the quest/journey as a motif underlying the protagonist's search and a framework for analyzing it. In the second chapter, based on a modified version of Annis Pratt's (1981) theory of an archetypal rebirth journey, I am going to examine the past of the protagonist of *Surfacing* to search for the clues of experiences that might have affected her, analyze the characteristics of her metamorphosis and the outcome of her journey.

1. THEMES IN *SURFACING* AND RELATED CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* includes various themes, which are all connected to the protagonist's journey. In the literature review of this thesis I will examine the works of the literary critics, whose focus has been on *Surfacing*. The analysis of their works will give an overview of the novel's setting and provide the key themes, which have an important role throughout the protagonist's journey as well as theoretical perspectives for an analysis of the novel in the empirical part of the thesis.

1.1 Female identity

The impact of gender roles and social position of women on their identity is a key theme in the novel *Surfacing*. J. Brooks Bouson (1993: 40) states that social roles in *Surfacing* are male-defined and for that reason women are seen as passive victims. Masculinity is portrayed as rationalistic and aggressive. Women are seen as sexual objects who cannot express their sexuality freely. Men are sexual aggressors and they use sex as a form of entrapment. Furthermore, women have lost touch with their true self.

According to Bouson (1993: 39), *Surfacing* is appealing to cultural feminists. Shannon Eileen Hengen (1993: 45) agrees with Bouson, saying that *Surfacing* is a feminist novel. Hengen also adds that narcissistic men affect women by shaping their identities and diminish their personal power. Sherrill E. Grace (1988: 35-36) concurs with Bouson and Hengen as she states that in the novel women have lost their true identity. Their identity is silenced and depowered by men in a patriarchal society. Women are repressed and denied and it is essential for feminist writers to find and release their true nature. Charlotte Beyer (1995: 103-104) also classifies *Surfacing* as a work of radical and cultural feminism. She further adds that women are in the position of "other" and are compared to colonized natives.

The protagonist in *Surfacing* attempts to find her true identity and therefore empower herself. The novel explores the values, which can free women from patriarchy. In the words of Frank Davey (1984: 57-59), Atwood's female protagonist in *Surfacing* lives in a "deeply flawed male world." Davey also agrees with the previous authors that women are not free in the patriarchal world. Males are seen as a danger and the protagonist in *Surfacing* must escape from the damage done to her by men in order to regain control.

1.2 Canadian identity

Closely related to the theme of female identity in *Surfacing* is that of Canadian identity. As Charlotte Beyer (1995: 103) states, *Surfacing* is a post-colonial novel and in the novel's setting Canada is in a crisis. Canada is freed from the oppression of the British and in search of its identity. Atwood writes in *Surfacing* about finding Canada's new identity and whether a new Canadian identity should be constructed or should it stem from the land and indigenous people. In Beyer's opinion, the protagonist's personal crisis about determining her identity is a reflection of post-colonial Canada. Ellen McWilliams' opinion coincides with that of Beyer. According to McWilliams, post-colonial writers are in the right position to find Canada's new identity (2009: 61).

The main character's journey in the novel reflects Canada in search of its national identity (2009: 65). The same idea is shared by Kit Dobson, who says that *Surfacing* is an important work about Canadian identity and nationalism (2009: 28). Moreover, the book includes anti-American views. America is seen as a destructive force, whereas Canada is seen as a victim because it was a colony. He also adds that Atwood promoted national identification and *Surfacing* is a representation of strong nationalism (2009: 30-31). Sherill E. Grace (1983: 5) also sees Canada as an exploited and oppressed victim because of colonization. In her discussion of the novel Barbara Hill Rigney also points out the anti-

Americanism (1987: 49) and she believes *Surfacing* to have elements of a political manifesto (1987: 38). According to her, in the mind of the novel's protagonist for the most part of the novel, Canada is a victim and America is the oppressor whose aim is to pollute Canada (Rigney 1987: 49). Coral Ann Howells (1996: 21) claims that for Atwood, wilderness is a distinctive national feature of Canada. Wilderness is considered to be a part of Canada's identity and the wilderness is threatened by pollution and urbanization.

According to June Schlueter (1988: 2), the view of the protagonist of *Surfacing* that Canada is exploited by Americans, reflects Canada's national habit of mind to see itself as a victim. Shannon Eileen Hengen (1993: 46-47), quoting Atwood, refers to the problem that Canada tends to consider itself as a victim. However, in her opinion, such a mentality is problematic. Atwood is also concerned with the topic of language as Canada's literary tradition stems from France, a foreign country. Charlotte Beyer is also concerned with the topic of language. In her opinion, language is a political and cultural concern because Canadian writers write in the same language as Canada's colonizers while they "attempt to assert their specifically Canadian voices" (Beyer 1995: 100).

1.3 Nature

The themes of female identity and Canadian identity are inextricably linked to the theme of nature in *Surfacing*. As observed by Coral Ann Howells (1996: 21), wilderness is one of the key themes in Atwood's writing and Atwood considers wilderness to be a symbolic feature of Canada. In the opinion of Sherill E. Grace (1983: 10), Atwood prefers nature over technology and she refers to Carol P. Christ who says that Atwood believes that a person must be connected to nature and natural energies in order to achieve one's true self and power.

According to the perspective of Charlotte Beyer, Atwood uses wilderness and

metropolis as literary discourse (1995: 97). Moreover, Atwood considers nature to be a symbol of Canada and associates nature with femininity (Beyer 1995: 106). Frank Davey holds a similar opinion with Beyer about wilderness being feminine and adds that women evolve, transform and combine past and present just like nature does (1984: 72). Davey also believes that connecting with nature in a technology prone world can heal people's social problems and help them change (1984: 57). In Davey's opinion technology in Atwood's writing is portrayed as a threat to nature. Technology is pictured negatively as it slowly attempts to replace and restrain nature (1984: 93). In Barbara Hill Rigney's discussion of *Surfacing*, she points out that the novel's protagonist perceives technology and artificial things as a threat and calls man-made objects "a violation to nature" (1987: 42). Kit Dobson (2009: 30) states that in the novel, Canada's nature offers people protection from Americans, who are associated with technology and destruction.

1.4 Duality

The above discussion of the themes of female identity, Canadian identity and nature has revealed the theme of duality. As Shannon Eileen Hengen (1993: 63) has observed, duality is a consistent theme in Atwood's oeuvre. In her numerous works she explores the oppositions of Americans and Canadians, men and women, culture and nature, and evil and good. Eivor Biese (1996: 26) notes how in *Surfacing*, America is portrayed as a force of destruction and oppression in the protagonist's mind, while Canada is portrayed as the opposite. As previously argued by Grace (1983: 5), Schlueter (1988: 2) and Rigney (1987: 49), Canada is perceived as an oppressed victim in the novel in relation to the United States of America. Kit Dobson (2009: 30) states the same as Biese and adds that Canada's nature in *Surfacing* is seen as a shelter from the destruction and violence of Americans.

Male-female duality is pointed out by Hengen (1993: 47) who claims that men in

Atwood's novels are often portrayed as narcissists, whereas women are quiet and muted, and suppressed by narcissistic men. Consequently, women and men are contrasted in Atwood's works. George Woodcock (1990: 17) presents a larger problem, which is brought up by Atwood in *Surfacing*. Atwood is concerned how natural world and modern technologically inclined society are in conflict.

However, all these dualities that Atwood establishes and explores have a special purpose. Sherill E. Grace (1983: 13) draws attention to how the dualities appearing in *Surfacing* actually function and she states that dualities are "interdependent aspects of a continuum of relationship." Furthermore, Grace (1983: 13) emphasizes that Atwood does not aim for "reversing the power structures" or "resolving /.../ polarities altogether." Instead, Atwood's intention is "to facilitate the harmonious process of interrelationship between the polarities" and "[break] imprisoning circles" (Grace 1983: 13).

1.5 Metamorphosis

The theme of metamorphosis is connected to the themes of female identity, Canadian identity, nature and duality as the characteristics of the themes initiate the metamorphosis of the main character. According to Branko Gorjup (2006: 130), metamorphosis is a significant aspect of Atwood's poetics. Gorjup further explains its function by arguing that "Atwood's poetics of metamorphosis contains this violent duality of oppositional forces (civilization and nature, male and female, etc.) but also offers a way of transcending it" (Gorjup 2006: 130). As observed by Annis Pratt (1981: 139-140) the novel *Surfacing* is about an individual quest for finding identity and strength. She analyses the novel in the terms of woman's "rebirth journey." The goal is achieved through metamorphosis and transformation. In Atwood's quest the character is required to pay attention to her body in order to undergo rebirth. Davey (1984: 121) argues that

metamorphosis in *Surfacing* means natural growth, which is encouraged by nature. In the view of Barbara Hill Rigney (1987: 114-115), *Surfacing* proves that women can go through suffering and emerge undamaged and victorious. The process of the protagonist's metamorphosis will be further examined in the empirical part of this thesis.

1.6 Quest/Journey

The protagonist's journey in *Surfacing* has been analyzed by different critics through the use of various motifs and frameworks. In her discussion of the novel Marie-Françoise Guédon (1983: 91) inspects how the themes of shamanic traditions associate with the journey of the protagonist. According to Guédon, the novel includes elements of an Indian vision quest. Carol P. Christ (1980: 13) analyzes *Surfacing* in the context of a women's spiritual quest. The quest is initiated by the feeling of nothingness and the goal is to find a renewed sense of self. Annis Pratt (1981: 140) sees the novel as an archetypal story of a "quest for rebirth and transformation." According to her, there are seven phases in the protagonist's journey, which are recurrent features in other numerous rebirth stories.

- I. "Splitting Off from the World of the Ego" (Pratt 1981: 142): the protagonist disapproves of the typical social roles and norms. In *Surfacing* the protagonist leaves the city in order to escape from her trauma. (Pratt 1981: 142)
- II. "The Green World Guide or Token Helps the Hero Cross the Threshold" (Pratt 1981: 143): the protagonist's memories of her childhood help her to seek a different kind of life. The protagonist sees the lake as an entrance (Pratt 1981: 143).
- III. "Confrontation with Parental Figures" (Pratt 1981: 143): the memories of parental figures reach the deepest parts of the unconscious. For the protagonist the memories are a crucial element in her transformation journey as the parental figures aid her through it (Pratt 1981: 143).

- IV. “The Green World Lover” (Pratt 1981: 43): a non-patriarchal love interest assists the protagonist’s rebirth journey. In *Surfacing* Joe is seen as a naturalistic figure, despite him being from the city (Pratt 1981: 143).
- V. “The Shadow” (Pratt 1981: 144): The Shadow refers to one’s anti-self and one must come to terms with it. Atwood’s protagonist sees her brother as a violent side of herself (Pratt 1981: 144).
- VI. “The Final Descent to the Nadir” (Pratt 1981: 144): the protagonist dives into the unknown, which can trigger madness and transformation. Insanity mimics the accepted role in society, that of a victim trapped and suffocating within an enclosure. (Pratt 1981: 144-145)
- VII. “Ascent and Re-Entry into Society as Known” (Pratt 1981: 145): For the fully transformed woman re-entry is problematic since her assumed role in society is by necessity secondary. This complicates the return to the society after transformation. Therefore, she experiences a backlash marked by an open ending of the novel. (Pratt 1981: 145-146)

2. METAMORPHOSIS IN *SURFACING*

In the empirical part of this thesis the unnamed protagonist's rebirth journey in *Surfacing* is analyzed. The aim is to find out what initiates the protagonist's metamorphosis, what she experiences during her transformation and how the rebirth journey ultimately changes her as a person. The analysis is based on Annis Pratt's (1981) model of an archetypal rebirth journey. The reason for choosing Pratt's model is that it is more concrete than those of Marie-Françoise Guédon and Carol P. Christ, and it defines the key events of the protagonist's metamorphosis. In her model she distinguishes seven phases of the journey, but in my thesis I have decided to modify it and divide the protagonist's journey into three phases to structure the analysis: the first phase focuses on the protagonist's life before her metamorphosis, the second phase deals with the process of her transformation and the third phase concerns the outcome of the metamorphosis. The three-part structure is based on the following: on closer scrutiny, the first five phases of Pratt's model are concerned with the events that trigger and contribute to the protagonist's transformation, the sixth is about the process of metamorphosis itself and the seventh phase discusses the outcome. In that way the model is more compact and it can be better applied to find answers to the research questions in this part of the thesis.

2.1 Phase one: the protagonist before her metamorphosis

The novel begins with the unnamed protagonist driving away from the city to her childhood home in Quebec after learning about her father's disappearance. She is accompanied by her boyfriend Joe, and David and Anna, a married couple.

From the beginning it is clear that something traumatic has happened to the protagonist in the city as she tries to suppress some painful memories. This becomes apparent in the scene where the characters eat ice cream and she suddenly bites into the

cone, which hurts the protagonist's face. She says: "if it hurts invent a different pain," (Atwood 1979: 9) which implies that she uses physical pain to relieve her mental pain. Another indication of her distress is the phrase "I have to keep myself from telling that story" which appears in the middle of her observations of the surroundings. She also talks about her ex-husband, who was a good man, but changed after they got married. According to the protagonist, they also had a child, but she disowned him after she got divorced. She sees herself as a victim in this relationship, which refers to her thinking in binaries. Another example of this is her mentality that Americans, unlike Canadians, are malevolent and try to pollute the Canadian nature: "They spread themselves like a virus" (Atwood 1979: 123), the protagonist thinks. In a broader sense, it can be said that she sees America in general as a threat and has anti-American views, as pointed out by Dobson (2009: 28).

Because of her failed marriage the protagonist seems to be emotionally numb. She is rather indifferent towards Joe, her boyfriend. They live together and Joe has expressed his love towards the protagonist, but she is unable to reciprocate. She finds only Joe's physical appearance to be appealing. She says: "Everything I value about him seems to be physical: the rest is either unknown, disagreeable or ridiculous" (Atwood 1979: 51). At one point she also compares Joe's appearance to a buffalo and calls him beautiful. This might be a clue that the protagonist feels more comfortable with people when they are less humanlike. Another example of her emotional detachment is her relationship with Anna. She claims Anna to be her closest friend, however, she has known her for only two months. They do not have a deep connection as Anna is unaware of the protagonist's past and does not share her marital problems with the protagonist either. They also view women's roles differently as Anna tries her best to please her husband and therefore suppresses her own wishes and needs, whereas the protagonist is more independent and is rather dismissive of Joe's wishes.

Furthermore, the protagonist feels alienated from the society. She feels that women are alienated by men who use marriage, sex as well as language and birth to control women. In the novel David is portrayed as a typical male oppressor of women. In the beginning the narrator thinks that David and Anna's marriage is perfect and it gives her some hope that marriages can be successful. However, as the story progresses, she realizes that the marriage is flawed and it is David's way to control Anna as she would have nothing left if she decided to leave him. David also uses Anna for sex any time he pleases and does not hesitate to cheat on her to hurt her. The protagonist also feels that men use language to entrap women by proclaiming their love or giving positive affirmation to women to corrupt them. In her opinion, language is deceptive and unnecessary. David also uses language to destroy Anna's confidence and make her feel bad so that she would have very little self-worth and would not want to leave. This is an example of men seen as aggressors who repress women as pointed out by Bouson (1993: 39) and Grace (1988: 35-36). The narrator is also resentful of the fact that women have to bear children. She talks about her own experience of pregnancy by saying: "It was my husband's, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator" (Atwood 1979: 28). She also adds: "he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was no more use. I couldn't prove it though, he was clever: he kept saying he loved me" (Atwood 1979: 28). This is a good example of a man's way of controlling women through language and birth in the mind of the protagonist. She feels powerless and is resentful towards society and the fact that social norms and expectations are imposed on children from birth.

While going through some old scrapbooks the protagonist found in her father's home, she reminisces about her childhood. She remembers her mother as a caring woman and as a symbol of nature. She remembers fondly how her mother used to feed the jays near the cabin. Her father, however, was a scientist and therefore more rational and

practical than her mother. Unlike her mother, her father was always willing to explain any question the narrator had. She also finds drawings she and her brother had made. This reveals that the protagonist and her brother were total opposites personality-wise. She had drawn cheerful pictures where everyone lived in harmony, but her brother's pictures had warlike images such as tanks, airplanes and swastikas and his drawings of nature were violent too.

The protagonist also examines her father's papers and finds some sort of scribbles. For a brief moment she believes that her father might have gone insane, but then realizes that the scribbles might be a clue to her father's whereabouts. She recognizes the scribbles to be paintings on a cliff nearby. The protagonist goes on a quest to the cliff with the hope of finding some answers and dives into the lake. Her plan to go to the cliff becomes one of the key events in her rebirth journey. After diving into water she sees a figure with limbs below and she says: "it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead" (Atwood 1979: 136). As it turns out, the protagonist has been lying throughout the novel. The protagonist's ex-husband was actually her art professor who was married. They had an affair and the protagonist got pregnant. However, the professor forced her to have an abortion, which caused the protagonist's trauma. When the protagonist surfaces, she begins to see her own complicity in the abortion: "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" (Atwood 1979: 137). All the remorse she has implies that she feels as she has failed as a mother. The fact that she could not give birth and protect her child causes her to have a lot of guilt. While she still feels like a victim, the protagonist realizes that she has been resentful towards the professor because he pressured her to go through with the abortion. He handled the whole situation without any guilt or remorse and that is why she left him. She admits having created a new reality for herself as she was unable to accept what she had

done: “A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better than none I could almost live in it, I’d lived in it until now” (Atwood 1979: 198).

After having remembered what truly happened to her, the protagonist desires to have a baby with Joe in order to seek forgiveness from the baby she was not able to give birth to. This time she wishes to do it the right way and in her own terms. In order to do that, she uses Joe to become pregnant and then plans her escape so that she could raise the baby the way she believes to be right. The protagonist also wants to keep it a secret because she believes that if people found out, they would force her to go through abortion again. She refuses to let that happen. Her distress truly shows the extent of her trauma as she is paranoid that anyone has the power to force her to get rid of her baby just like her professor did. The protagonist also appears to be especially traumatized from the procedure itself: “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” (Atwood 1979: 156). She is willing to give up everything and escape in order to raise her baby alone and in her own way. This time she wishes to give birth alone as naturally as possible as she is traumatized by the machines and coldness that were present during her abortion. It appears as if the protagonist perceives the technological devices used during her abortion as a threat, which was also pointed out by Davey (1984: 93) and Rigney (1987: 42). In the protagonist’s mind “The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I’ll lick it off and bite the cord /.../ I will never teach it any words” (Atwood 1979: 156). This line shows how her mind is undergoing changes; it seems that she imagines herself living alone with her baby like animals, which could be an indication of the beginning of her rebirth journey.

2.2 Phase two: the protagonist's descent into madness

The protagonist's true metamorphosis starts when she learns about her father's death and does not get on the boat with Joe, David and Anna, and stays on the island alone. Annis Pratt describes this phase by saying that "fictional heroes often experience a chaos of surreal images and symbols at this phase" (Pratt 1981: 144). The start is apparent when the protagonist declares: "From any rational point of view I am absurd; but there are no longer any rational points of view" (Atwood 1979: 163).

At this point the protagonist does not have to hold back her feelings anymore. She cries for the first time since her traumatic experience. Also, she expresses her feelings of resentment and anger towards her parents by accusing them of their deaths. She believes her parents had a choice to stay and not leave her without thinking who would take care of her. The protagonist then decides to go on a quest and try to have an encounter with her deceased parents. In the mind of the narrator the parents turn into god-like creatures. In order to have the encounter, the protagonist believes that her envisioned god-like parents leave clues of rules she has to follow: "I'll have to listen carefully, if I trust them they will tell me what is allowed" (Atwood 1979: 170).

The protagonist realizes that she can only have the encounter with her parents if she transforms. Instead of her parents visiting her, she must visit them and that requires her transformation into someone closer to the nature and less human. She looks at herself in the mirror and feels as if the mirror traps her. She refers to Anna, who constantly used a mirror to assure her appearance is flawless: "it no longer traps me, Anna's soul closed in the gold compact" (Atwood 1979: 169). She turns the mirror around to be free and "Not to see myself but to see" (Atwood 1979: 169). In order to do that, she decides to destroy all the man-made physical objects in the house and free herself by living outside just as animals do. It seems as if she sees artificial objects as something terrible that prevents her

from being truly free, as pointed out by Rigney (1987: 42). The only thing she takes with her is a blanket because she says that she needs it “until the fur grows” (Atwood 1979: 171). The protagonist then goes to the lake and washes herself, which can be perceived as a symbolic act of purification. After giving up everything man-made, she also needs to purify her body in order to be truly free. She says: “When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface” (Atwood 1979: 172).

Her mind also reflects her progression into an animal. She only eats what is found in the wilderness, food in tin cans and jars is not allowed. While trying to bite through a beet, she realizes her teeth cannot penetrate the rind. According to the narrator, she is not strong enough yet and this implies that with time she will evolve. At first, she eats food that is grown in the garden of her father’s home, but she soon figures that also the garden is not truly natural. Despite her hunger she refuses to pick food from the garden, because she believes it to be against the rules and her parents’ wishes. She even refuses to wash the plants she finds and she spots some mushrooms, which appear to have psychedelic effects after the protagonist consumes them. As a result, the protagonist has a hallucinatory experience through which she finally feels truly immersed in nature. She is not connected to her human self anymore; it seems as if she believes to be a creature that embodies different forms of nature. She describes her new form: “I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning. /.../ 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 1979: 175). Also, she no longer feels the need to use language as animals do not use it either, and then she thinks: “why talk when you are a word” (Atwood 1979: 175). It is obvious that the images she sees and the senses she experiences are surreal and illogical, which is in accordance with Pratt’s description of the process of transformation.

However, the protagonist is cautious of other people as she thinks that people would not be able to see what she has truly become and still see her as a human being. The narrator claims that other humans are a threat and she fears that they would hurt her if they found out who she has transformed into. When people come to look for her on the island, she decides to seek shelter in nature as at this point she is completely detached from humans and immersed in nature.

The protagonist eventually meets her mother's spirit. She sees her mother feeding the jays near the cabin, just as she always remembered her. Although she remembers her mother as a caring woman and her feeding the jays is one of her fondest memories, the protagonist is terrified of the figure and the figure senses it. Her mother's spirit disappears and the jays fly up. She then says: "I squint up at them, trying to see her, trying to see which one she is" (Atwood 1979: 176) as if she believes that her mother has turned into a bird. The next day she has an encounter also with her father's spirit and those two encounters are similar in nature. She sees her father who has transformed into something else, "the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone" (Atwood 1979: 180-181); the protagonist compares him to a wolf, but she is not scared. She then realizes that the figure is not her father as he is dead, but her father has become a part of nature just as she thought her mother's spirit lives on in a jay.

The protagonist accepts the fact that her parents are dead and therefore, she does not feel the need to follow the rules she made up any longer and goes back into the cabin. She eats a tin of beans as she feels the need to stay alive, because she owes it to her parents. Eventually, she accepts that her parents were only human and they did their best to provide for their children and keep them safe. They both had positive and negative traits, and more importantly, they both had more strengths than weaknesses. She used to blame her mother for dying and leaving her alone and also blame her father for her social

alienation because they lived on a secluded island because of his will. However, now she can objectively see and appreciate her parents' contribution to raising and shaping her. She now perceives her mother as a strong woman who adapted to living in scarce conditions after living in the city. Her parents told her nothing about the ongoing Second World War at the time and her mother did her best to take pictures of her children in the hope of forgetting about the war and isolation. Her father brought them to the island to protect them and she realizes that trying to uphold the illusion of everything being alright and keeping their lives in order must have been straining for her father. The protagonist also understands that she was not the only victim stuck on the island; her whole family was in the same position. Furthermore, she understands her brother's violent drawings about war and his attitude "join in the war, or to be destroyed" (Atwood 1979: 183), but in her opinion, there are also other options. What is more, she comes to a conclusion that not all Americans are evil and furthermore, that Canadians can have evil intentions too. This is a good example of how her way of thinking is transformed, since before her thinking was based on dualities, but now she begins to see that there can be more than two sides and she is able to consider things from different angles. As brought up by Grace (1983: 13), the protagonist does not resolve the polarities, but rather realizes that everything cannot be divided into two groups.

The protagonist finally understands that she cannot stay on the island, because she would run out of food and freeze and the only option to survive is to go back to the city. She then turns over the mirror again and sees that the creature looking back at her is not an animal. The protagonist's coming to terms with her parents' deaths, recognizing other points of view, and realizing that she is only a human suggests that her metamorphosis is completed.

2.3 Phase three: the result of the protagonist's metamorphosis

After her metamorphosis the protagonist's first words are: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I do that I can do nothing" (Atwood 1979: 185). The protagonist abandons her victim mentality and feels empowered. Her perspective on life has reversed – she realizes that her actions have consequences and the lie she had told herself and the others is worse than the reality of what had actually happened. Moreover, she is aware that retreating from society is not an option, because exiling herself would mean inevitable death. She takes off her blanket and puts on clothes, meaning that she has accepted her humanity. The protagonist has found her true self while living alone in nature, which is in accordance with the view of Sherill E. Grace (1983: 10) who believed that one must be immersed in nature in order to regain their true identity and Davey (1984: 121) who claimed that the protagonist's metamorphosis was encouraged by nature. At last, she is ready to live her life again and she says: "I re-enter my own time" (Atwood 1979: 185).

As mentioned above, the protagonist feels that she has to live because her parents gave her life and protected her, and she feels that she has a moral obligation to be grateful to them. Another reason is that she believes to be pregnant. Even though it has been only five days since she tried to have a baby with Joe and there is no way to be certain, she believes she carries a child. The protagonist realizes that the child is dependent on her and her duty is to protect it just as her parents protected their children. She announces: "if I die it dies, if I starve it starves with me. /.../ it must be born, allowed" (Atwood 1979: 185). For the first time the protagonist places someone else's needs above hers. She has accepted that she could not have been a mother before, but now she has a new opportunity. The protagonist no longer feels as a failed mother but rather attempts to accept the past and look forward to the future. The protagonist has finally reconnected with her feminine side and does not see having a child as a weakness.

At the end of the novel Joe comes looking for the protagonist on the island. She is unsure whether to go back to the city with him or not. Although she knows that she is unable to survive on the island, she is also wary of going back to the city with Joe. Her main concern is that she is unsure if Joe is going to offer her a new freedom or captivity. Since her view of life has changed and she is at last connected to her feelings, she knows that if she goes with him, their lives will have to change. Unlike before, they need to communicate with each other and the protagonist feels that even if eventually they do not stay together, she would be fine.

At the same time, her re-entry into society would not be unproblematic. The protagonist feels empowered after her transformation and refuses to be a victim. However, women's roles in society are considered to be secondary after the roles of men. It can be assumed that if the protagonist decided to become a member of society again, she would experience a backlash as people would try to diminish her newfound power, because as seen in the novel, men aim to have power over women. The problematic entry into society is also pointed out by Pratt (1981: 146) in her discussion of the final phase of her model of the rebirth journey. However, the protagonist seems to trust Joe and believes that he is different from other men and yet she is unsure what to do as she says: "I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though my feet do not move yet" (Atwood 1979: 186). Thus, the novel has an open ending, which is characteristic of rebirth stories, as emphasized by Pratt (1981: 146), and the reader can only imagine the protagonist's next actions.

CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* portrays a world where society is male-defined and men use their power to keep women under their control. Because of that, women have lost touch with their true self and are seen as passive victims. In order to reconnect with their true self, women must find their voice in patriarchal world. Even today, the voice of numerous women is silenced and therefore the novel still has importance in today's world. *Surfacing* is an example of a woman's struggles in society and her journey of finding her true identity.

In my thesis I analyzed the journey of the protagonist in *Surfacing*. The novel follows a protagonist who is on a quest to transformation. In the novel, she is introduced as a socially alienated woman who feels resentment towards the society in general. She feels no connection to other humans and is rather selfish in her actions. The reason for her resentfulness is her abortion, which caused her trauma. Her guilt and anger caused her to create a new reality for herself. She also feels as if her parents had abandoned her when they died. Throughout the novel the protagonist sees herself as a powerless victim and feels rejected.

During her transformation she slowly begins to realize that her view of life is flawed and in order to survive she must accept the past and be considerate of other humans. With the help of nature, the protagonist no longer divides the world and society to good or bad, but rather also accepts other points of view. The main outcome of her transformation is that she refuses to feel like a victim and is willing to become a part of society again. Even though she considers reentering the society, it would still be problematic as the society has not gone through a transformation with her. It is still male-defined and she realizes that if she were to reenter, it would be complicated as there is a chance that other people would not be willing to accept her and her new frame of mind.

Altogether, the novel has an open ending, which leaves the protagonist's future for the reader to guess. Even though no one knows whether the protagonist will become a part of society, the outcome of the book is still victorious. The protagonist, who was resentful and cold towards the society and other people, transforms into an empowered woman who refuses to feel inferior. She finds her true identity and her self-worth and emerges from her quest as a victor instead of a victim. In the view of Rigney (1987: 114-115), *Surfacing* proves that the protagonist emerges undamaged and victorious. However, even though in the end the protagonist is a victor, she is still damaged by her past experiences and the fact that she has accepted the past and does not let it longer define her life, does not mean that she is undamaged. Nevertheless, the novel proves that a woman can arise from hardships unbeaten and be an empowering example to other women. In the words of Pratt (1981: 145): "the transformed human hero seems to be transferring her boon of power not to any figure within the text but to the woman reader herself."

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Helena Viies

The Protagonist's Quest for Transformation in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Peategelase transformatsiooni otsirännak Margaret Atwoodi romaanis *Surfacing*

Bakalaureusetöö

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Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva töö eesmärgiks on analüüsida, kuidas on kujutatud peategelase transformatsiooni Margaret Atwoodi romaanis *Surfacing*. Taassünni teema on kirjanduses üsna levinud ning töö eesmärgiks on uurida seda teemat Atwoodi romaani kontekstis.

Töö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatusest, kahest peatükist ning kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatus annab informatsiooni teose tausta ning peamiste probleemide kohta, mida see käsitleb. Samuti sõnastatakse sissejuhatuses töö eesmärk ning küsimused, millele tahetakse töös vastuseid leida.

Esimene peatükk on kirjanduse ülevaade ja see võtab vaatluse alla Atwoodi raamatu keskmes olevad teemad. Teemade selgitamise aluseks on kirjanduskriitikute tööd, mis käsitlevad Atwoodi teost. Kirjanduse ülevaate teemad kirjeldavad probleeme, mis on raamatus välja toodud ning annavad taustinformatsiooni raamatu tegevuspaiga kohta.

Teine peatükk on empiiriline osa, mis keskendub peategelase otsirännakule. Teine peatükk on jagatud kolmeks osaks: esimene osa käsitleb peategelase elu enne tema transformatsiooni ning tema otsirännaku põhjuseid, teine osa keskendub tema muutumise protsessile ning kolmas osa võtab vaatluse alla tema muutumise tulemuse.

Kokkuvõte sisaldab endas töö käigus tehtud järeldusi.

Analüüsist selgub, et kuigi peategelane elab patriarhaalses ühiskonnas ja on end kaua aega tundnud ühiskonnast eraldatuna ning tal on ohvri mentaliteet, väljub ta siiski oma transformatsioonist võidukana. See on eeskujuks ka teistele naistele ning on lootust, et ka ühiskond võib muutuda.

Märksõnad: transformatsioon, naise identiteet, otsirännak

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