

*Mythic Reconception and the Mother /  
Daughter Relationship in  
Margaret Atwood's "Surfacing"*

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**I**N *Surfacing* Margaret Atwood alludes in incident, character, imagery, symbol, language, and theme to various grail motifs. These motifs, reconceived in substantially feminist terms, provide a most illuminating mythological context for the central mother/daughter relationship and the narrator's senses of maternal inadequacy and guilt. A reading of *Surfacing* in terms of Atwood's mythic reconception of grail legends draws together the psychological, cultural, and mythic levels of the narrator's experience as a woman. Further, some of the narrator's experiences of the wilderness in the third section of the novel are illuminated by a reading of them in relation to mythological female experiences of wilderness, those of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt. I begin my argument by pointing to Atwood's web of allusions to grail motifs, and then proceed to discuss the mother/daughter relationship and the narrator's feminine socialization in the context provided by those allusions and by biblical myth and Freudian symbolism worked into the reconceived grail quest structure of the narrator's spiritual progress.

T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* presents a vision of tawdry, trivialized, degenerate, and obscene sexual self-expression in his contemporary wasted civilization — from the tawdriness of the bored society woman and the sterility of the women in the pub discussing abortion to the numbed coolness of the typist and the promiscuous obscenity of the Thames daughters — and shows through ironic allusions how far such misused and debased sexuality falls short of grand, noble, idealized sexual passions of

literary and cultural tradition. In *Surfacing* Margaret Atwood utilizes similar grail motifs to Eliot's, but reconceives the problem of misused sexuality in substantially feminist terms. Misused sexuality is able in Atwood's view to reduce its male and female victims to death-in-life, automaton capacities. It is a delicious irony that the novel's utterly damned David has had a career in the mass medium of radio, is a teacher of Communications in an Adult Education programme, and is directing a film called *Random Samples*, the very title of which indicates its fragmentary, discontinuous quality as artistic product. In her presentation of the narrator of *Surfacing* Atwood demonstrates the psychological processes, maturational crises and cultural conditioning which may lay waste the sexual self-expression of women; she draws together psychological, cultural, and mythic dimensions of human experience in her contemporary culture.

Atwood also directly links the false values of wanton destruction of natural beauty and technology with misuse of masculine sexuality, although she by no means suggests that such values are a sole product of misused masculine sexuality (and its corollary of repression and intimidation of women or the "female" in men). The Americans, and Canadians whose states of soul are American, mainline on aggressive, stereotypically masculine "straight power," have "no conscience or piety" (127-28), and senselessly and wastefully kill the heron with the technology of firearms. The narrator suggests they would kill fish with the technology of explosives for sheer sport if they could. In the grail legends the fish is sacred to those spiritual forces able to lead people back "from the shadows of death to life" (Weston 120). Placed in the context of grail legends the wanton killing of the heron, a traditional symbol of regeneration, and the fish by the "Americans" signals sacrilegious destruction of nature and life. The "Americans" are both perpetrators and products of a "laminated" and debased culture, "framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks" (128), vulgarizing "pleasure, cars and women, the skins bald as inner tubes" (112). It is significantly a *power* company, a supplier of electricity to consumers, which floods the lake, inundating ancient sites of spiritual power and submerging the simple, natural splendours of the comparatively virginal wilder-

ness. Tourists and sportsmen follow the power company in penetration of the wilderness. (My sexual metaphor is deliberate.) Such technology also supplies women consumerist images of femininity and the mass-produced cosmetics and gold compacts which facilitate their production in turn of conventionally feminine self-images.

In *Surfacing* the narrator is both quester and Fisher King, without political kingdom as Arnold E. and Cathy N. Davidson note (51). Like the Fisher King of grail legends the narrator is initially diseased. The narrator's malaise at the opening of the novel, a malaise of repression, waste, and emotional coolness, is brought about by her having fallen victim to some of the false values which are laying waste her land, Canada, and contemporary civilization: misuse of sexuality; fragmented and debased culture; and the logic of the head, divorced from the heart and body. Contemporary civilization, and more specifically Canadian society, landscape and citizens, are also being laid waste by pervasive and insidious American cultural influence. In *Surfacing* the narrator's mother fulfils the role of spiritually healthy double of the Fisher King figure; Jessie Weston in her *From Ritual to Romance*, T. S. Eliot's main source of grail motifs in *The Waste Land*, notes the existence in the Chrétien-Wolfram group of grail legends of a mysterious, healthy double of the Fisher King, usually a father or grandfather (115). In *Surfacing* the mother's lack of self-consciousness apparent in the contents of her diary and the narrator's having taken her for granted while living at home, never seeing her as a person, render her mysterious to her daughter. The mother's spiritual grace is indicated by her association with birds, especially in the narrator's vision of her "ghost," for in the Christian tradition birds are emblems of humility and grace, particularly in their joyous acceptance and trust of the commonplace daily round. In the crucial late childhood and adolescent phases of her sexual development the narrator has fallen victim to exotic and debased sexual cultural influences from outside the home. The narrator is haunted in the early stages of the novel by an allegedly foetal memory, described fully at the end of Chapter 8, of her mother having rescued her

brother from drowning in the lake. During her crucial dive in the lake in Chapter 17 the narrator recognizes that

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 like a *chalice*, an *evil grail* 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. (143; emphasis mine)

The memory of her mother having rescued her brother from drowning belongs to the "faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports" (144) which had masked and helped repress her memory of abortion. It is the key faked memory, the unmasking of which unlocks the painful truth of the relationship with her first lover which culminated in abortion and allows her to take on an appropriate measure of responsibility for her complicit guilt, after she peels back the last layer of disguise: "I never saw it. . . . 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" (143). "Remnant of trapped and decaying animals" also refers to her release of her brother's collected experimental animals and his subsequent anger, coalescing it in the "evil grail" with the aborted foetus in her first lesson in patriarchal intimidation.

The image of the aborted foetus highlights its connections with the novel's recurring grail motifs not only through direct naming: the foetus is fish-like, as foetuses are in the early stages of pregnancy, and the narrator has not successfully fished it through childbirth from the amniotic fluid of the womb. As I have mentioned, the fish is sacred in grail legends to spiritual forces associated with life; imagery and water are associated in the legends with spiritual questing for life and health. The symbolism of life-giving fishing from water in the narrator's mother's rescuing of her son is also Freudian. Freud says that when a woman rescues a child from water she is represented as the mother who bore the child ("Contributions" 202). The narrator represents

her mother as successful fisher, successful life-giver, woman transformed to mother, with all the status and fulfilment maternity may provide. That the narrator's unconscious *constructs* this memory and allows it to surface in the conscious mind indicates powerfully her own repressed sense of maternal inadequacy. As her mother's potential double, the narrator, another fisher with a maternal role model in her memory, has failed through her abortion, failed in her life-giving, reproductive, creative capacity to make the transformation from woman to mother.

The memory indicates the narrator's awe of apparently miraculous childbirth (it is compared with raising from the dead) and her anxiety about death. Her childlike curiosity about death, from which she is able to be distracted by food, is more comfortable than her adult awareness of its seemingly gruesome finality, in her initially repressed sensationalized awareness, for instance, that her first foetus was unmiraculously scraped into a bucket to be disposed of down the sewers. But here her mother acts to protect and comfort her with food and a lack of final answers about death. The key faked memory of the mother rescuing the brother and its psychological link with the evil grail underlines the importance of the grail motifs to the central mother/daughter relationship and to the narrator's senses of maternal inadequacy and guilt.

The image of the evil grail is one of a chalice, a grail vessel, but two images of lance and bloodied grail vessel are offered in *Surfacing*, one representing evil and the other natural, life-giving wholeness and spiritual regeneration. The lance associated with the evil grail, the bottle bloodied with foetal blood which metaphorically held death and guilt from the narrator, is the medical instrument which helped procure the abortion, the "fork" which skewered the foetus (80). The image of regenerative grail occurs at the moment of impregnation in Chapter 20: the lance here is Joe's penis, the bloodied vessel the narrator's womb lined with blood and mucosal tissue ready to receive the fertilized egg. That the impregnation is redemptive is indicated by the language of absolution ("forgiving") and regeneration ("rising") in which it is couched (162). With her second pregnancy the narrator is

determined to prove, to give full rein to, her life-giving capacities as potential mother, potential successful and healthy fisher figure.

Grail questers must confront the horrors of physical and spiritual death and guilt in the Chapel Perilous; the narrator of *Surfacing* enters her metaphorical Chapel Perilous with her dive in Chapter 17. Towards the end of the chapter the religious status of the site of her dive is made apparent in imagery: it is a place of gods, "sacred" and offering "salvation"; the narrator makes votive offering of clothes, and to have sexual intercourse there would be "sacrilege" (145-47). While T. S. Eliot works Oriental Indian religious elements into his grail vision in *The Waste Land*, Atwood works Canadian Indian religious elements into *Surfacing*, especially in her presentation of the narrator's testing in her metaphorical Chapel Perilous. It is here the narrator confronts the awfulness of death and her own murderous guilt in the figures of the drowned person or potential person in the figures of the narrator's father and her first foetus (which had drowned in air). The drowned person in *The Waste Land* is Phlebas the Phoenician.

There are further parallels between the grail visions of *The Waste Land* and *Surfacing*. The hanged man of T. S. Eliot's poem (hanging from one foot on a T-shaped cross) finds his parallel in the similarly shaped wantonly killed heron strung up by the feet with its wings having fallen open in Atwood's novel — both creatures are symbolically associated with the possibility of renewal. In *Surfacing* this regeneration is possible if the quester/narrator turns away from the values signified in the grisly image of the killed heron. As in *The Waste Land*, redemption in *Surfacing* only seems possible on a personal level. *The Waste Land* finishes on a note of tentative hope of renewal and peace, the I sitting upon the shore fishing with the waste land behind him wondering: "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (l. 425). *Surfacing* concludes with the female protagonist having undergone a process of psychological healing in confronting death and complicit guilt, having abjured false values, and having fallen pregnant, reconceived. The umbilical cord ties her to the "gold-fish" foetus (191). She, too, has tentative hopes of using her new sense of female adequacy, wholeness, and strength to set her own

affairs and future life in order, hopes signalled in the opening sentences of the final chapter: "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 anymore" (191).

These grail motifs facilitate a reading of the narrator's experiences in *Surfacing* as a process of emerging restoration to spiritual health and reproductive, creative vitality. That restoration to health and vitality necessarily involves recognition of the extent and nature of the narrator's malaise and the cultural conditioning to false values which produced it.

The psychology of the narrator of *Surfacing* may be explicated in part in terms of repression and eventual cathartic acknowledgement of the truth about the past, in part in terms of her having tried to fit her life into the patterns of scripts "written" for her by debased cultural conventions and cultural conditioning of sexual roles, in part by the psychology of the victim, and in part by senses of maternal inadequacy and guilt in relation to her mother's exemplary life. The published criticism of *Surfacing* can offer some ingenious readings of the narrator's psychology. It has been suggested, for example, that the representation of the stuffed moose family on top of the gas station — father, mother, and male child in one group with the female child tagging along well behind (13) — is a paradigm of the narrator's own family in her youth (Arnold E. and Cathy N. Davidson 41). We simply are not given enough information in the text about the narrator's childhood to be able to assert that the mother/father/male child were so close-knit as to partially exclude the narrator from the family group. The moose family highlights commercial exploitation of a sentimental domestication of nature; it might be significant, though, that in the sexual political economy of adultery the narrator's first lover is able to return excellent interest on the snapshots of his wife and children, "his stuffed and mounted family" (149), that interest being the narrator's abortion.

There would appear to have been some fairly conventional gender role stereotyping of brother and sister. There are the childhood scrapbooks. The narrator's earliest scrapbook contains sentimental drawings of smiling rabbits and Easter egg houses; as

the narrator remarks, implicitly comparing them with her brother's drawings: "No monsters, no wars, no explosions, no heroism" (91). The stories of the Second World War which inevitably infiltrate the childhood peer group and the family home and the father's status as scientist proffer stereotypically masculine role models to the narrator's brother. He, in turn, writes the scripts of childhood activities to which his sister submits, from identifying and inciting his sister to kill bad leeches, to suggesting gruesome games like the mutilation of the doll or pretending that their feet had been blown off. Annis Pratt's suggestion that he is the technologically violent murderer-side of the narrator's own personality (144) does not, in my view, give sufficient weight to the acculturation to such sexual role-playing. Later her fake husband will intimidate her by *his* scripts, dismissing women as high-culture artists, pressuring her into an abortion, even compelling her assent to wear a fake wedding ring.

David and Anna, though, are the novel's epitomes of masculine and feminine misuses of sexuality. The narrator comes to realize her emotionally cool affinity with David — they both suffer from atrophy of the heart. She is, however, repulsed by the prospect of intercourse with a man who uses sex as a weapon in mechanical and dehumanized scenarios (152, 165). She redeems herself in turning down his sexual pass (bearing the brunt of his subsequent anger and sexist bullying) and in destroying the film in which the psychologically abused Anna has been forced to play a degrading part. The narrator appraises the spiritual value of David's and Anna's misused sexuality at the end of the second section of the novel; they are "already turning to metal, skins galvanizing, heads congealing to brass knobs, components and intricate wires ripening inside" (159). This perception of mechanical, death-in-life values is an enabling one; it allows the narrator to interpret the experiences she recounts in the second section of the novel in terms of separation of body and head.<sup>1</sup>

In late childhood and adolescence the narrator herself fell victim to the peer group and cultural pressure crippling Anna. She learns it is "worse for a girl to ask questions than for a boy" (97). The narrator's adolescent scrapbooks, too, contain no original drawings, merely illustrations culled uncritically from magazines



and pasted in. The narrator's mother is critical of the adolescent self-images her daughter desires; the collages of illustrations which express these desirable self-images are a parody of consumption of culturally fabricated images of women: "They were ladies, all kinds: holding up cans of cleanser, knitting, smiling, modelling toeless high heels and nylons with dark seams and pill-box hats and veils. . . . On some of the pages were women's dresses clipped from mail order catalogues, no bodies in them" (91). The bodiless dresses reveal want of biologically female substance in, and the superficiality of, these fragments of feminine culture; these images are like those of the princesses in the narrator's commercial art who don't eat, shit, cry, or give birth; look bland and pretty; and anaemically lack the red associated with blood, anger, and passion and held sacred in Amerindian culture. These fragments and images are purged of natural, vital sexuality; in accepting the values of her debased and imitative commercial art the narrator would perpetuate these damaging stereotypes in a society being laid waste by false sexual values. At ten the narrator was already being socialized by peer group pressure into making "a kind of religion" of feminine glamour. Her "icons" ("Ladies in exotic costumes" to "a slavery of pleasure" [42-43]) are highly derivative; the fashion model poses constrain women's natural bodies; the dresses offer no protection against the icy wind — feminine glamour is unnatural and impractical, a "slavery of pleasure."

Feminine glamour introduces the exotic into the adolescent narrator's life: the narrator is not acculturated to this religion by her mother. The narrator catches herself repeating to Anna her mother's words of dismay about her own adolescent artificial glamour: "You don't need that here . . . there's no one to look at you" (44). She acknowledges that Anna is like herself at the time of her first love affair. Part of the narrator's spiritual progress, then, is to resist entrapment in a world of prettified and vain feminine self-images involved in the neurotic checking of one's appearance in mirrors or compacts. The narrator turns the mirror in the cabin to the wall in Chapter 23 (with the cutting "I must stop being in the mirror" [175]) and in the bush accepts a natural, tousled, and dirty self; re-emerging from the bush and

turning the mirror back around, the narrator comments she is a "new kind of centrefold" (190), risking societal displeasure and misunderstanding expressed in institutionalization.

The narrator's mother is very different from the insubstantial glamorous role models her adolescent daughter worships as icons. We appreciate her as the narrator does through illustrative or symbolic anecdotes and images. The cherished images the narrator has of her mother are those of her competence and adequacy, her actions which speak louder than words. The mother wears a practical, dirty leather jacket with sunflower seeds in the pockets, has plainly dressed hair, simple clothes, and a natural face; she has a body which has borne and nurtured children; she is resourceful, practical, courageous, resilient in the face of illness, caught up in the natural cycles of the weather, apparently lacking in debilitating self-consciousness, and gentle in her approach to birds and nature. In the novel's terms she is a woman of the heart rather than the head — there may even be symbolism in her having died of a brain tumour. Her adult life has apparently been lived peacefully within the confines of home and nature, her role being largely one of provision of physical/emotional sustenance and warmth to family or birds. By comparison, the narrator in her more sexually adventurous life style favours cool relationships and feeds her lover Joe "unlimited supplies of nothing" (84). The story of the mother's childhood failure which agonizes the narrator is a symbolically significant one: her mother had adventurously dreamt of flying, made herself wings from an old umbrella, and broken her ankles in her fall from flight. The key element in the mother's dream is adventure which transcends the mundane domestic world; the Freudian symbolism of the dream indicates the desired adventure to have been of an unconsciously sexual kind ("Symbolism and Dreams" 188). Her mother's scope for sexual self-expression (understood in the broadest sense), circumscribed by domesticity, is, in the narrator's adolescent eyes, an agonized, crippling failure; she as adult seeks sexual self-expression beyond the domestic in art and orthodoxly casual sexual relationships. The narrator thinks these worlds, the domestic and the sexually adventurous, so separate she cannot seek parental emotional support after her abortion and betrayal by her lover —

later she realizes the "totalitarian innocence" she ascribed to her parents was her own (190).

When the narrator first returns to her parental home she thinks the survival manuals she memorized as a child under the influence of her parents are worthless, impractical — female Gothic fiction would have been more practical in her world of sexual adventure — but, in fact, on the island she is able to use her childhood knowledge to facilitate the provision of food, to protect David, Joe, and Anna from the dangers of the wilderness, and to ensure her own survival and the survival of her newly conceived foetus during her period alone in the bush. This knowledge enables her to successfully take on the role of mother to friends and potential child, a role in which she had felt herself inadequate. The narrator's redemptive spiritual progress involves acceptance of her mother's legacy — empowering reconception of another foetus (with all its mythological symbolism) and cleansing rejection of the last vestiges of the religion of feminine glamour. Her fetishization of feminine glamour would not seem to have survived the ambiguously liberating sixties — when she returns to her parental home she is dressed in recognizably sixties' clothing of jeans, sweatshirt, and fringed shoulder bag. She recognizes Anna's artifice early in the novel but her criticism becomes most damningly articulated within her newfound frame of referential values in Chapter 21: Anna is "captive princess"; not allowed "to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out"; during sexual intercourse "her face twists into poses of exultation and total abandonment, that is all"; she has no interests other than fake feminine glamour; she is "half dead" (165-66). What the narrator conceives of as her mother's gift or legacy, which sums up her lifetime's wisdom of the heart, is her own preserved childhood pictograph of them, pregnant mother and foetus, pictograph of a protective, powerful spirit (158). Her pregnant mother is apparently quite calm in the presence of an all-powerful male figure, both God and Devil, good and evil. The image significantly derives from a period in the narrator's life before she has undergone her damaging conversion to the religion of feminine glamour. The narrator exchanges the false icons associated with the magic gilt compact

(165) for the truer icon of the goldfish foetus and childbirth, and in so doing moves to rapprochement with her mother's values, acceptance of her desirability as a healthy double.

One further aspect of the mythic dimension of the narrator's experience in *Surfacing* which merits a final comment is the way in which her experience of the wilderness in the final section of the novel is made comprehensible by its parallels and contrasts with a Christian model of female experience of wilderness, the mortification and humbling of the bodies of Saints Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt, both of whom before their baptism had misused their sexuality (Warner 302-03). Their rejection of the vanities of the world and their past lives is signalled by the removal of clothing and penitential living in the wilderness as animals. Mary Magdalene, in particular, is allowed by God to grow hair to cover her shame at her own nudity. In Chapter 23 of *Surfacing* the narrator continues her redemptive progress by rejecting the world of feminine vanity (turning the mirror to the wall), the logic and order reason imposes on nature (avoiding enclosures and paths), destroying her links with the past ("Everything from history must be eliminated" [176]), and undergoing a cleansing in the waters of the lake, a cleansing resembling a ritual baptism, and in which the narrator casts off her clothes. The narrator of *Surfacing* accepts her nudity in a way the Christian tradition never could; she wants to grow fur not to hide her shame, but for the practical purpose of keeping out the cold. The narrator, though, does experience a humbling of her body and its desires in relation to nature, especially to the food and sustenance to be drawn from nature. This humbling accords her the privilege of sensing the foetus grow, of sensing natural bodily processes of growth. She experiences wholeness and a revitalizing and truthful perspective on past and future as a "natural woman" (190), rather than as a chastised woman like Mary Magdalene. Very importantly her rebirth involves humbler, realistic interpretations and expectations of human relationships. She comes to see her first lover as a "normal man . . . selfish and kind in the average proportions" (189) rather than a malevolent figure, and recognizes the worth of Joe and the modest possibilities inherent in a renewed relationship with him (192). She does not spurn

the patriarchal world of masculine violence and intimidation as the mythological Daphne does (allowing Apollo, male god of reason, the victor's laurel crown), but rather accepts the challenge of rediscovering her power as a woman and renegotiating her personal and professional relationships, of casting off the victimhood involved in her earlier misuse of her own sexuality.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Part Two is told predominantly in the past tense — precisely because it is articulated from the enabling perspective the narrator reaches as she watches David, Anna, and Joe play cards at the end of Chapter 19. Atwood is often criticized for using the past tense here; see, for instance, Grace 100.

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