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**From being an Unreliable Narrator to becoming a Reliable one: A Study of Margaret
Atwood's *Surfacing***

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The focus of attention in modern critical theories has radically shifted from the author and the age to which he belonged, to the reader who is now taken to be the co-author. It is now difficult to deny that a work of art aims to produce an effect on the reader in some way.

In the conventional novel there was not much of this interaction between the work and the reader. The reader was almost always at the receiving end, sitting in a cozy armchair with the omniscient author telling him everything.

But the use of the device the point of view in the novels of writers like Henry James and Joseph Conrad, in which the all-knowing, all-seeing author withdrew, gave the comfortable armchair reader a jolt out of his customary passivity into an active and responsive participation in the action of the novel.

A variation on the basic technique of point of view, which has been successfully exploited by many authors, is the use of the unreliable narrator.

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From being an Unreliable Narrator to becoming a Reliable one: A Study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

An unreliable narrator is one who cannot be relied upon to provide accurate information, so that the reader is obliged to try to deduce, from the possibly misleading account given by such a narrator, the true facts of the case.

All these considerations have motivated the present paper, which is an enquiry into the technique of the use of the unreliable narrator by Margaret Atwood in her novel *Surfacing*.

Surfacing embodies one of the central concerns of Atwoodian fiction – a search for identity. Everything in the novel is focussed through the point of view of the central character, the anonymous woman-artist in search of her missing father on a remote island in a northern Quebec, along with her lover Joe and another young couple, David and Anna.

While the protagonist attempts to unravel the mystery behind the disappearance of her father, the reader struggles to make sense of the often conflicting stands of her story about her marriage, her husband and her child.

At various points in the novel she relates incidents from her past. She remembers her inability to return home after her wedding and keeping her child hidden from her parents. The image of her brother as he nearly drowned recurs- although the incident took place before she was born. She remembers her husband treating her like an invalid – instead of bride- after their wedding ceremony; she feels herself to have been betrayed by him. The incidents do not form a coherent whole. Her narration seems to have characteristics of a dream-vision, rather than a realistic portrayal based on a cause effect sequence.

When the travelers stop at the gas station with 'three stuffed moose' noticing that they were dressed in human clothes, the narrator described a father moose, a mother moose and a little boy moose, but fails to notice 'a little girl moose' on the roof until it is pointed out her. She does notice the father-mother-son constellation, but not the daughter or herself.

A similar separation occurs at the end of this chapter when, in the middle of a sentence in the present tense, she switches to the past: "At intervals the old road crosses us, it was dirt, full of bumps and potholes..."¹ Remembering a family that had travelled on this road, she calls them "they", only to break off: "That won't work, I can't call them 'they' as if they were somebody else's family: I have to keep myself from telling that story." (*S*, p.12)

These time switches in the mind of a narrator whose perception screens out significant objects, and who has to remind herself of her identity, introduce a narrative technique to dramatize the tension of internal conflict: her struggles to keep herself “from telling that story” are what tell it.

Also the narrator constantly checks and corrects bits of her own narrative. She herself brings her propensity for distortion to full consciousness: “I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure that they’re my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: if the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I’ll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it, the ones who could help are gone. I run quickly over my version of it, my life, checking it like an alibi...” (S, p.70)

Thus, the reader of *Surfacing* must work at untangling the real from the unreal.

Yet, in retrospect, the narrator herself provides us clues throughout the novel that the personal history she initially presents is a fabrication. In the third chapter, she refers to “my husband and child, my attractive full-color, magazine illustrations, suitable for framing” (S, p.25) which suggest that they are a fantasy. Later, she notes that her current lover, Joe, does not know about her child, and will not find out by stumbling across photographs of it, because none exist.

Early in the novel, the narrator even allows the French Canadian friends of her parents to believe she is still married. “I’m safe, I’m wearing my ring. I never threw it out; it’s useful for landladies. I sent my parents a post after the wedding, they must have mentioned it to Paul, that, but not the divorce. It isn’t part of the vocabulary here, there’s no reason to upset them. I’m waiting for Madam to ask about the baby, I’m prepared, alerted; I’ll tell her I left him in the city; that would be perfectly true, only it was a different city, he’s better off with my husband, former husband”. (S, p.19)

In order not to disturb her parent’s friends, the narrator is prepared to tell lies even about her own lies. Later, she has a brief, unbidden memory of her husband carving his initials into a fence, teaching her to carve her own and suggesting permanence about their relationship that the ensuing time has negated. She maintains that it was she who ended the relationship: “I was

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what's known as the offending party, the one who left, he didn't do anything to me. He wanted a child, that's normal, he wanted us to be married" (S, p.44).

When the group docks at the island cabin, the narrator remembers her brother's 'drowning', how her "brother was under the water, face upturned, eyes open and unconscious" (S, p.28). Her mother told her about yanking her brother out and pouring "the water out of him" (S, p.71). But the narrator insists that "...an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look through the wall of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar" (S, p.28).

She further acknowledges that she did not select a name for her child before it was born: "I never identified it as mine" (S, p.30). The truth of the abortion is prefigured in the language Atwood uses in the third chapter: "I have to behave as though it doesn't exist, because for me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh canceled" (S, p.45).

By thus hinting at the reality of her narrator's past, Atwood maintains the tension between her two selves as the narrator gradually revises her invented version, replacing it with the 'real' story that emerges as the layers of the first are peeled away.

This method of the use of the unreliable narrator in hinting at its own unreliability and then moving on to present the real facts is unique to Margaret Atwood.

When the narrator enters a numinous wilderness, the fabricated past unravels to reveal only a collage of random memories pieced together so as to camouflage the truth. What proves unreal is the narrator's account of her wedding, her failed marriage, and a child given over to the husband she had divorced.

As a matter of fact, she had never married. Atwood allows us only gradually to understand- as the narrator herself confronts it – that she has imaginatively transformed an affair with a married man and the abortion of a child into marriage, childbirth and divorce.

She thus not only lies to the reader but – more importantly – to herself about herself the central facts of her life as an adult woman: marriage and motherhood. So deeply has she buried her experiences with adultery and abortion that even her private thoughts and memories free

from it. Unable to live with the pain of the truth, she has invented her own: “.... I needed a different version, I pieced it together the best way I could...” (S, pp.144-145)

In search of her missing father, she dives deep into the lake. But instead of his drawings that she hopes to find there, she is confronted with her father’s dead body, and thus a final acceptance of his death. The incident serves to release her own blocked senses. The image of her dead father corresponds to the memories of her nearly drowned brother, the latter of which she suddenly recognized as a substitute for her memory of her aborted fetus.

The connecting link is the corpse’s congealed stare, for her unborn baby had its eyes open, too. “I knew when it was, it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me...” with “huge jelly eyes and fins..., I couldn’t let it out, it was dead already, it has drowned in air. It was there when I woke up, suspended in the air above me...and I thought, whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it.” She imagined knocking the bottle “off the table” and breaking it. But finally, she admits that she “never saw it” because it has been thrown into “the sewers by the time (she) woke, back to the sea... The bottle had been ... (a) remnant of the trapped and decaying animals...,” specimens her brother had collected in bottles and she had set free. The bottle memory is yet another disguise, “secreted by my head to keep the death away from me” (S,p.144).

The protagonist can then recall the correct facts surrounding the other incidents. The man she remembers was her lover, not her husband, there was no wedding, no childbirth- only the abortion, which she had on his instructions.

Hence, towards the end of the novel, the unreliable narrator goes on to admit her own distortions. As Heather Murray in “The Synthetic Habit of Mind: Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*” says: “The narrator’s journey..... has been a progressive correction of lies and avoidances, healing of splits and doublings, in a true telling of the stories of the dead baby, the lost husband, the drowned brother, the culpable father.”

By thus employing an unreliable narrator, Atwood calls upon the reader to actively participate in the process of arriving at the meaning and significance of things without the dependable guidance of a reliable, authoritative voice. Artistically also, the novel is very satisfying to the reader who comes to regard such work as a rewarding and enriching experience.

REFERENCES

¹ Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* ,[New York: Random House, 1998], p. 10.

All further references to this work appear in the text.

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